

Title: The Clock Ambiguity and the Emergence of Physical Laws

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Abstract: The “clock ambiguity” is a general feature of standard formulations of quantum gravity, as well as a much wider class of theoretical frameworks. The clock ambiguity completely undermines any attempt at uniquely specifying laws of physics at the fundamental level. In this talk I explain in simple terms how the clock ambiguity arises. I then present a number of concrete results which suggest that a statistical approach to physical laws could allow sharp predictions to emerge despite the clock ambiguity. Along the way, I get to ask some interesting questions about what we expect of fundamental laws of physics, and give some surprising answers.

# The Clock Ambiguity and the emergence of physical laws

Andreas Albrecht

UC Davis

Perimeter Institute Colloquium

October 22 2008

AA gr-qc/9408023 and

AA & A. Iglesias arXiv:0708.2743 (PRD '08)

AA & A. Iglesias arXiv:0805.4452

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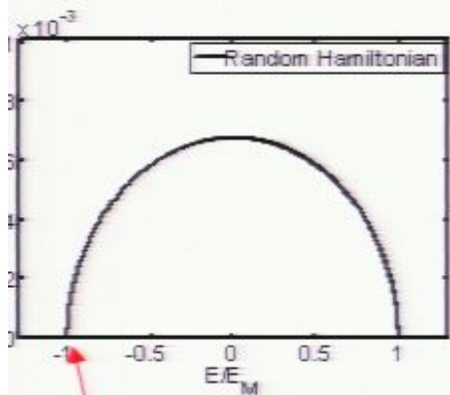
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Taylor expand around some energy  $E_0$  and set 0<sup>th</sup> and **1<sup>st</sup>** order terms equal.

“Energy of the universe”



$$\frac{\left(\frac{E_0 - E_S}{E_m}\right)^2}{\left(1 - \left[\frac{E_0 - E_S}{E_M}\right]^2\right)} = \alpha b \left( c \frac{E_0}{\Delta k} \right)^\alpha$$

Huge number

Close to edge of semicircle

Extremely close to unity

k-space lattice gap ( $2\pi/\text{box size}$ )

$$\left. \frac{dN}{dE} \right|_R = \left. \frac{dN}{dE} \right|_F \text{ at 1<sup>st</sup> order}$$

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## Questions

- 1) Should a fundamental theory state the laws of physics explicitly, or draw them at random from a distribution (which is hopefully sharply peaked in some way)?
- 2) Is field theory + general relativity a valid description of nature at energies below  $10^{80}$  GeV (the energy of the observed Universe).
- 3) Why do I think some aspects of current theoretical physics should be absolute, while I am willing to abandon others in the hopes of achieving a deeper understanding.

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- 1) Should a fundamental theory state the laws of physics explicitly, or draw them at random from a distribution (which is hopefully sharply peaked in some way)?
- 2) Is field theory + general relativity a valid description of nature at energies below  $10^{80}$  GeV (the energy of the observed Universe).
- 3) Why do I think some aspects of current theoretical physics should be absolute, while I am willing to abandon others in the hopes of achieving a deeper understanding.

NB:

- I am asking these questions because I am forced to as I attempt to do quantum cosmology.
- I have some concrete results which I believe are provocative.

## Key points

- “Internal time” in quantum gravity leads to total ambiguity about the laws of physics (AA '94) aka “the clock ambiguity” (AA & Iglesias '07, '08). *Specifically, it is impossible to specify the laws of physics in any fundamental way.*
- Perhaps input assumptions are wrong (for example probability without time)
- Perhaps we can actually do physics under these conditions

# Outline

- 1) The clock ambiguity
- 2) How one might do physics despite the clock ambiguity
- 3) Case study: Field Theory “from” random matrices

- In GR, the full Hamiltonian annihilates the state:

$$H |\Psi\rangle = 0$$

- due to time reparameterization invariance.
- Many interpret this to mean time emerges by
  - identifying a degree of freedom (or a “subsystem”) as the “clock” and
  - looking at correlations between the rest of the universe and the clock.

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**Next:** Express the above in a finite and discrete space (should give a “good enough” account of real physics)

Consider a state

$$|\Psi\rangle_S$$

In superspace

$$S$$

Identify the clock subspace  $C$  with  $S = C \otimes R$

“the rest”



Now consider bases

$\{|t_i\rangle_C\}$  spanning  $C$  (“eigenstates of the clock operator”)

$\{|j\rangle_R\}$  spanning  $R$

The direct products states form a basis for the superspace, so one can expand any state in superspace:

$$|\Psi\rangle_S = \sum_{ij} \alpha_{ij} |t_i\rangle_C |j\rangle_R$$

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Now define

$$|\phi(t_i)\rangle_R \equiv \sum_j \alpha_{ij} |j\rangle_R$$

so that

$$|\Psi\rangle_S = \sum_{ij} |t_i\rangle_C |\phi(t_i)\rangle_R$$

In this formalism

$|\phi(t_i)\rangle_R$  is “the state of the universe  
at  $t_i$ ”

To answer the question “what is the probability of finding the universe in state  $|x\rangle$  at time  $t_3$ ?”

Pose a conditional probability question: If the clock is in state  $|t_3\rangle$  what the probability of finding “the rest” in state  $|x\rangle$ ?

Answer:

$$\left| \frac{{}_R\langle x | \phi(t_3) \rangle_R}{\sqrt{{}_R\langle \phi(t_3) | \phi(t_3) \rangle_R}} \right|^2$$

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So far I have just given a formal statement of a standard approach

For example, classic papers in quantum cosmology use the cosmic scalefactor “ $a$ ” as the time or “clock” parameter.

*(Hartle & Hawking '83, Banks et al '85, Halliwell & Hawking '85, Fischler et al '85)*

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Now I will demonstrate how simply by identifying a new clock subsystem  $C'$  one can use the original state  $|\Psi\rangle_S$  to describe any state evolving according to any Hamiltonian.

$$|\Psi\rangle_S = \sum_{ij} \alpha_{ij} |t_i\rangle_C |j\rangle_R$$

To start with, a different wavefunction evolving according to a different Hamiltonian can correspond to a *different* state in superspace:

$$|\Psi'\rangle_S = \sum_{ij} \beta_{ij} |t_i\rangle_C |j\rangle_R$$

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I will now explicitly construct a new clock-rest split that yields

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Primes here  
not here

First, for convenience re-label the tensor product basis states

$$|k\rangle_S \equiv |t_i\rangle_C |j\rangle_R$$

where  $k(i, j)$  defines some one-to-one mapping from the finite set of integer pairs  $\{(i, j)\}$  to the same number of single integers  $\{k\}$

and thus we can re-label the expansion coefficients

$$\alpha_k \equiv \alpha_{i(k), j(k)} \qquad \beta_k \equiv \beta_{i(k), j(k)}$$

where  $i(k)$  and  $j(k)$  just invert  $k(i, j)$

Choose a unitary transform  $\mathbf{M}$

so

$$\mathbf{M}|\Psi\rangle_S = |\Psi'\rangle_S$$

or

$$|\Psi\rangle_S = \mathbf{M}^{-1}|\Psi'\rangle_S$$

Now we have the old state

$$|\Psi\rangle_S = \sum_k \alpha_k |k\rangle_S$$

and the state corresponding to the new wavefunction with the new time evolution

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We can operate on both sides of this with  $\mathbf{M}^{-1}$  to get

$$\mathbf{M}^{-1} |\Psi'\rangle_S = \sum_k \beta_k \mathbf{M}^{-1} |k\rangle_S$$

or

$$|\Psi\rangle_S = \sum_k \beta_k |k'\rangle_S \quad \text{where} \quad |k'\rangle_S \equiv \mathbf{M}^{-1} |k\rangle_S$$

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(  $\mathbf{M}$  unitary preserves normalized  
property of bases)

Now use the same function  $k(i, j)$   
to construct the new clock-rest  
decomposition:

$$|t_{i(k')}\rangle_{C'} |j(k')\rangle_{R'} = |k'\rangle_S$$

so we get

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Example:

- Build  $|\Psi\rangle_S$  out of standard model of electroweak physics (for which a Nobel prize has been awarded) .
- A different choice of clock would yield same world with  $O(3)$  model of electroweak physics being true (and presumable with a Nobel prize awarded to *its* inventors).

## Comments on the clock ambiguity:

- No similar issue with lab physics. A cosmological perspective is fundamental to the point.
- Most clock choices give “garbage”
- No respect for continuum
- Well-defined measures & probabilities in superspace (no time) required.

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## UPSHOT:

Either some part of the input assumptions are wrong or we must be able to do physics under these conditions (!)

Comme

Do we really understand quantum gravity well enough to feel forced to accept the implications of the clock ambiguity?

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Q: Do we really understand quantum gravity well enough to feel forced to accept the implications of the clock ambiguity?

→ No special perspective is fundamental to the point.

→ Most A: No. But the clock ambiguity is rooted in very

→ No real basic ingredients:

→ Well-known

- Quantum Theory

(no time)

- Internal time

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- Quantum Theory (see Deutsch and Wallace)
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For further  
discussion

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Rest of talk

Similar ideas in the functional formalism:

→ *General statistics* C. Wetterich Nucl. Phys. B314 (1989), p. 40.

→ *Geometry from general statistics* C. Wetterich Nucl.Phys.B397:299-338,1993.

See also

→ Matrix theory

→ Matrix universality of gauge and gravitational dynamics (L. Smolin)

# Outline

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- 2) How one might do physics despite the clock ambiguity
- 3) Case study: Field Theory “from” random matrices

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- Superspace formalism with internal time is fundamental (fundamental language of probability?)
- Quantum Measurements is just
  - i) Schrödinger equation plus
  - ii) Thermodynamical arrow of time→ not a separate problem from finding these ingredients
- No *a priori* assumptions about space & gravity (causality etc.)
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The search for “Good Clocks” → successful observers

→ Thrive as tiny subsystems

→ Learn and predict behavior of surroundings

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“Anthropic”, but not about  
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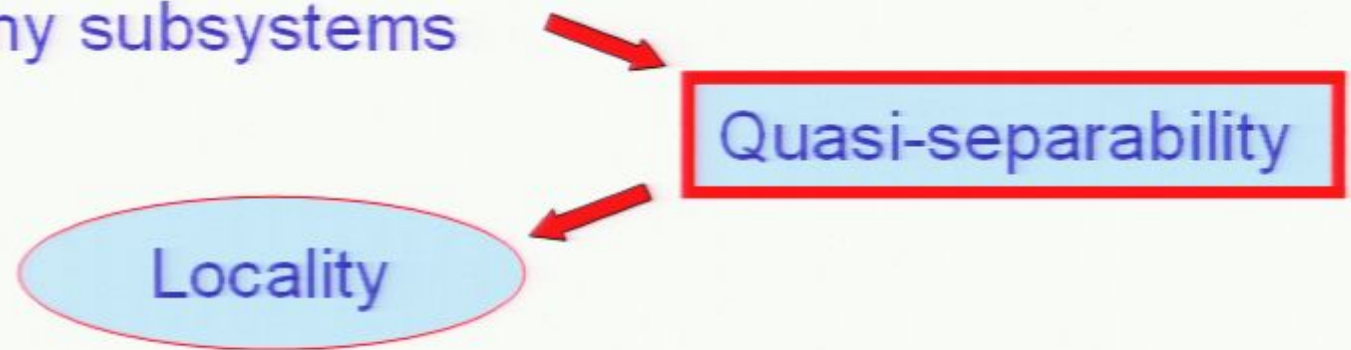


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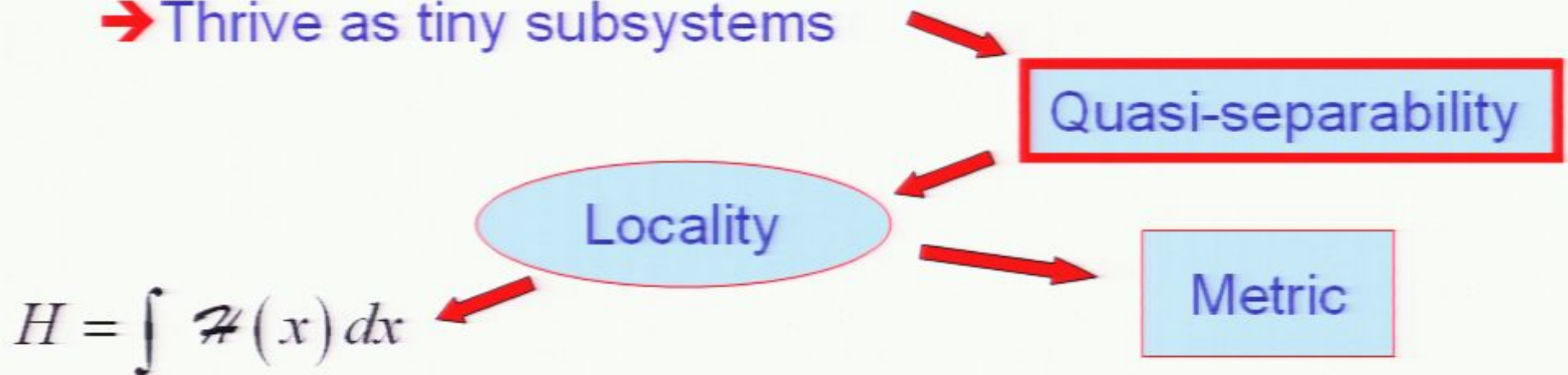
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All other  
“random Hamiltonian”  
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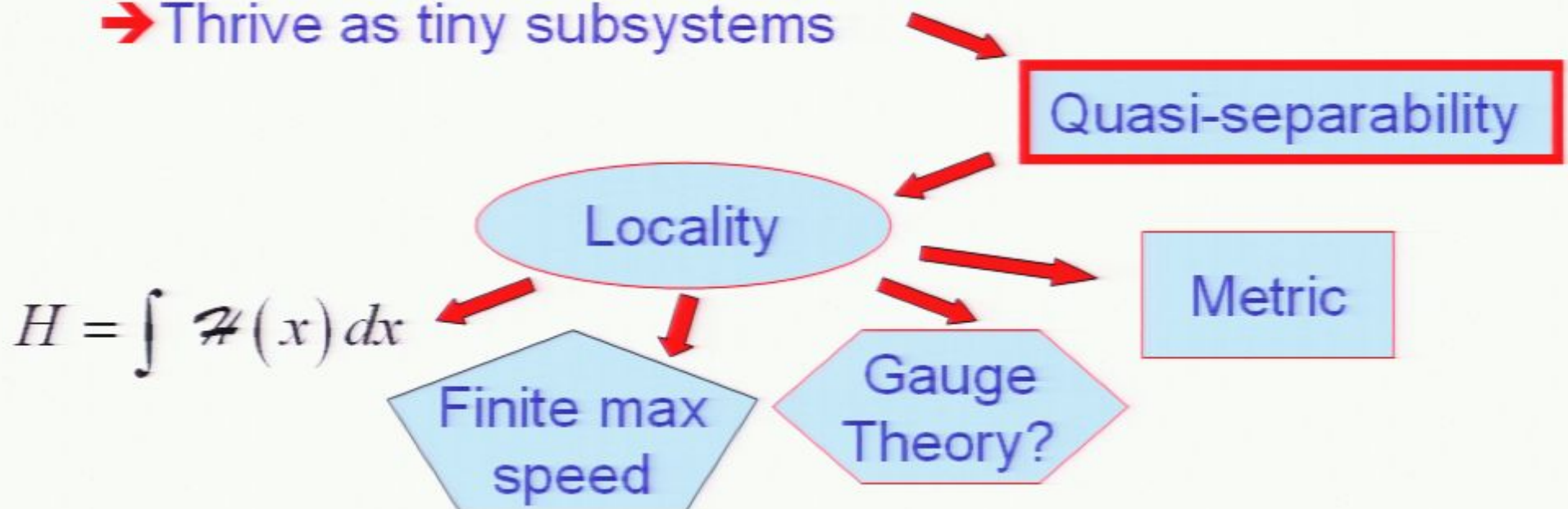
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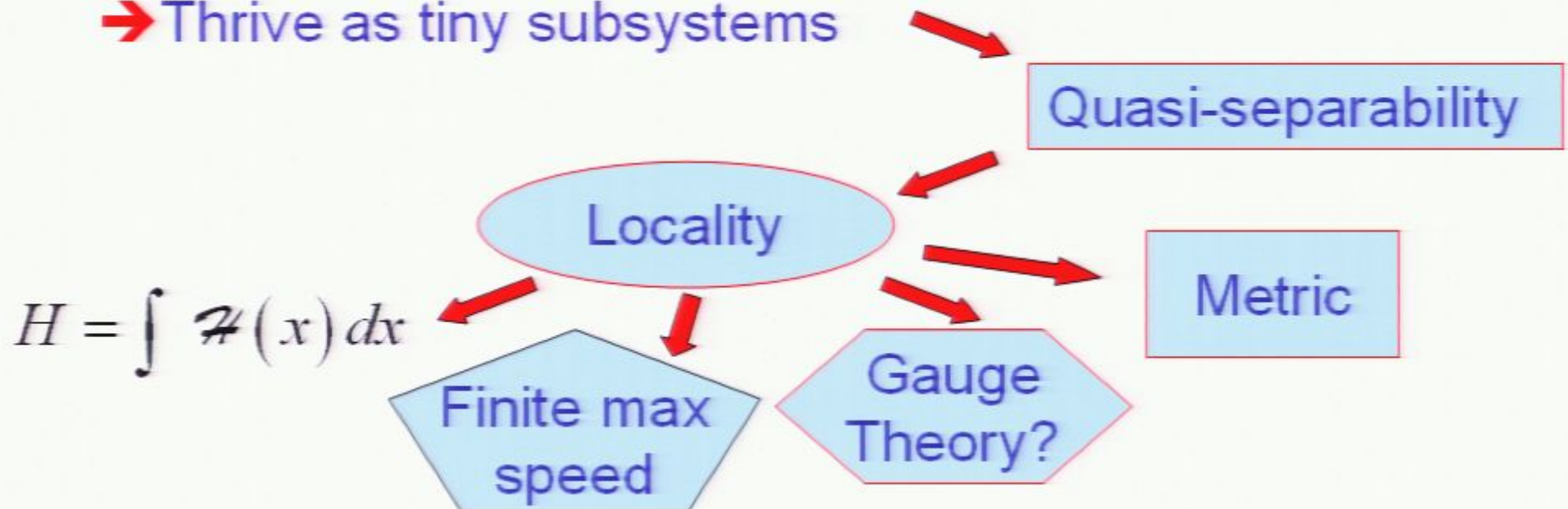
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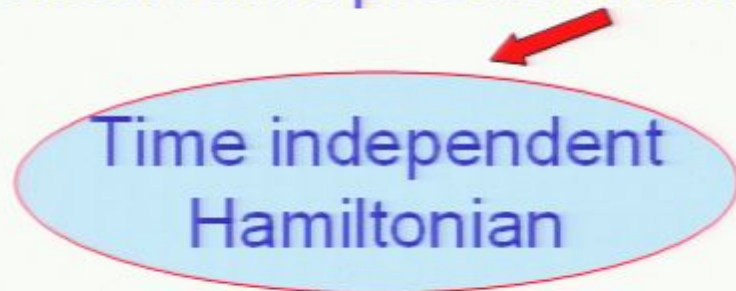
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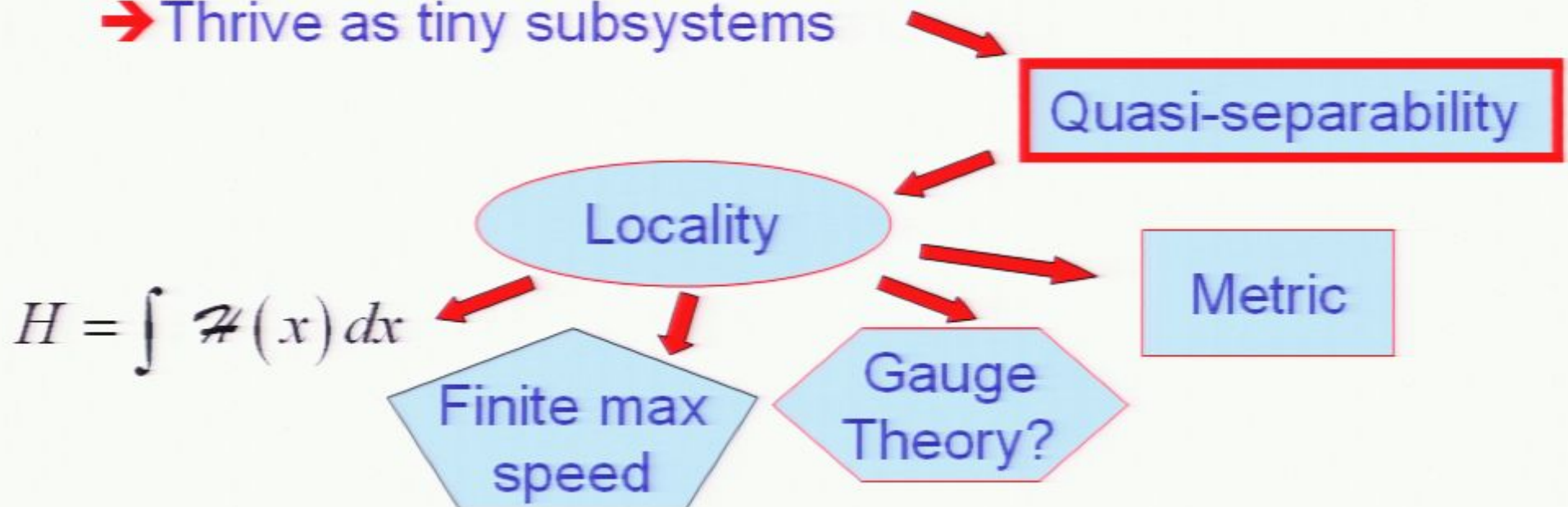


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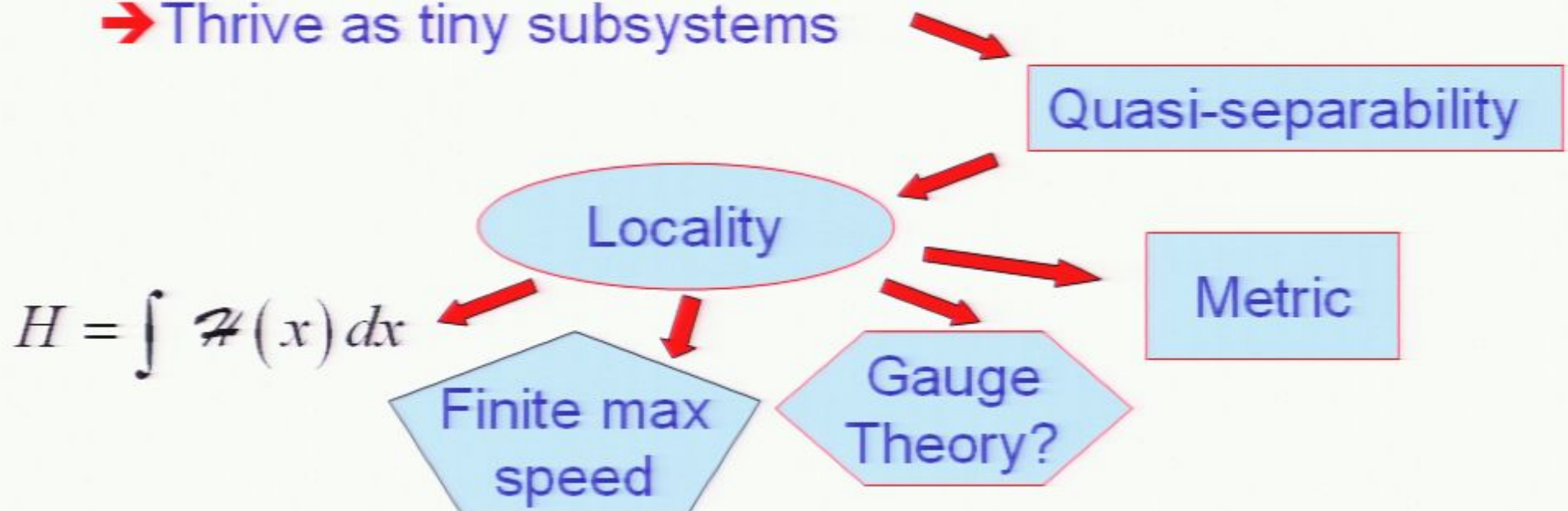
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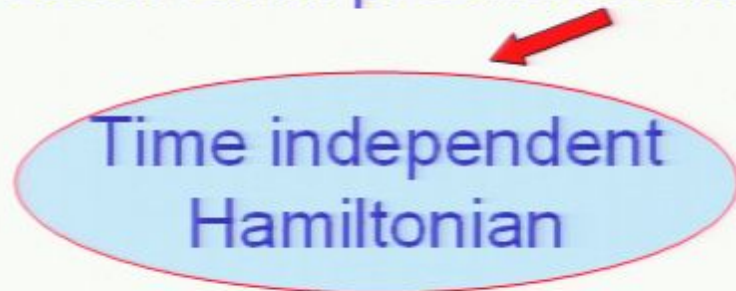
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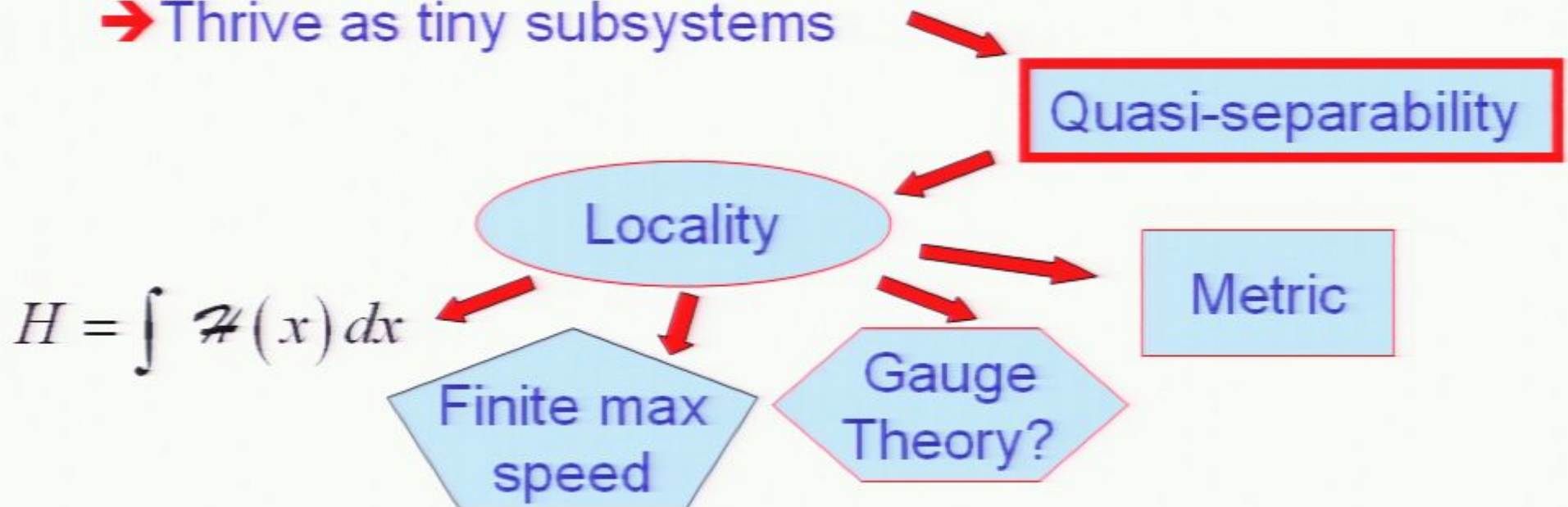


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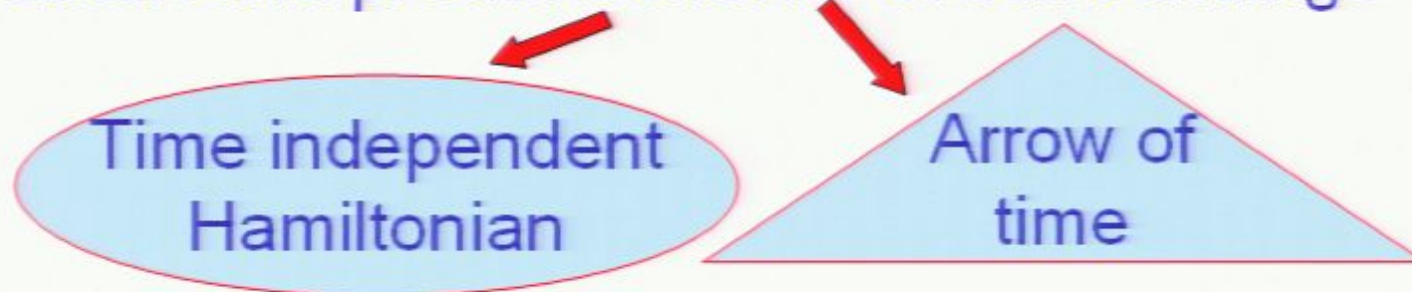


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- 1) The clock ambiguity
- 2) How one might do physics despite the clock ambiguity
- 3) Case study: Field Theory “from” random matrices**

### For part 3:

- Choosing a clock subsystem at random leads to a random state undergoing random time evolution.
- How well does the Hamiltonian of the observed physical world match a random Hamiltonian?

## Key point:

- The fundamental point of comparison is the eigenvalue spectrum.
- Once the eigenvalue spectrum of the Hamiltonian generated by a “random clock choice” matches that of known physics “we are done” since the additional steps of identifying field operators, observables etc in the corresponding Hilbert space is “straightforward”.

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$E$ -spectrum matching is a test these ideas must pass

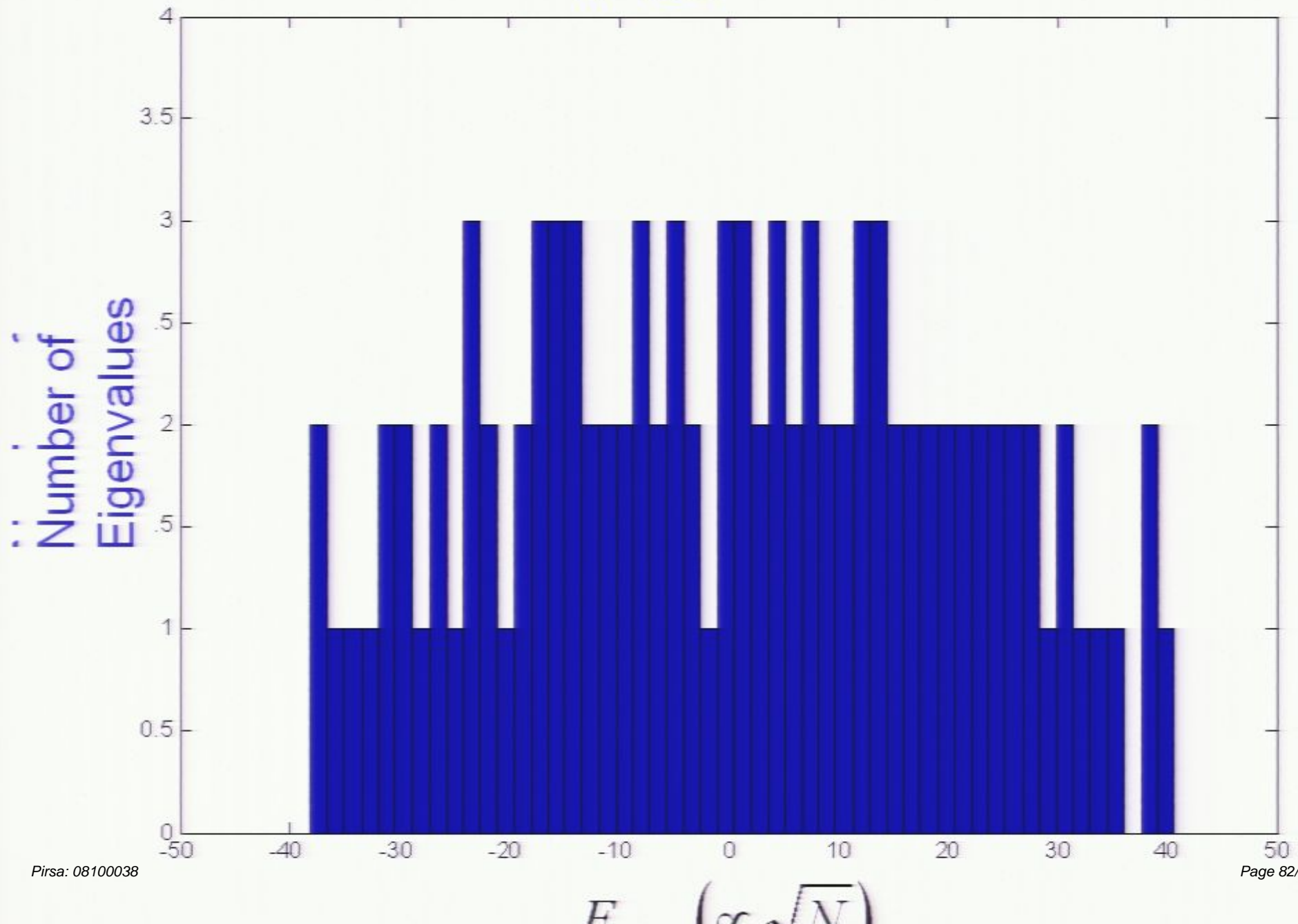
### 3i) Wigner theory of random Hamiltonians

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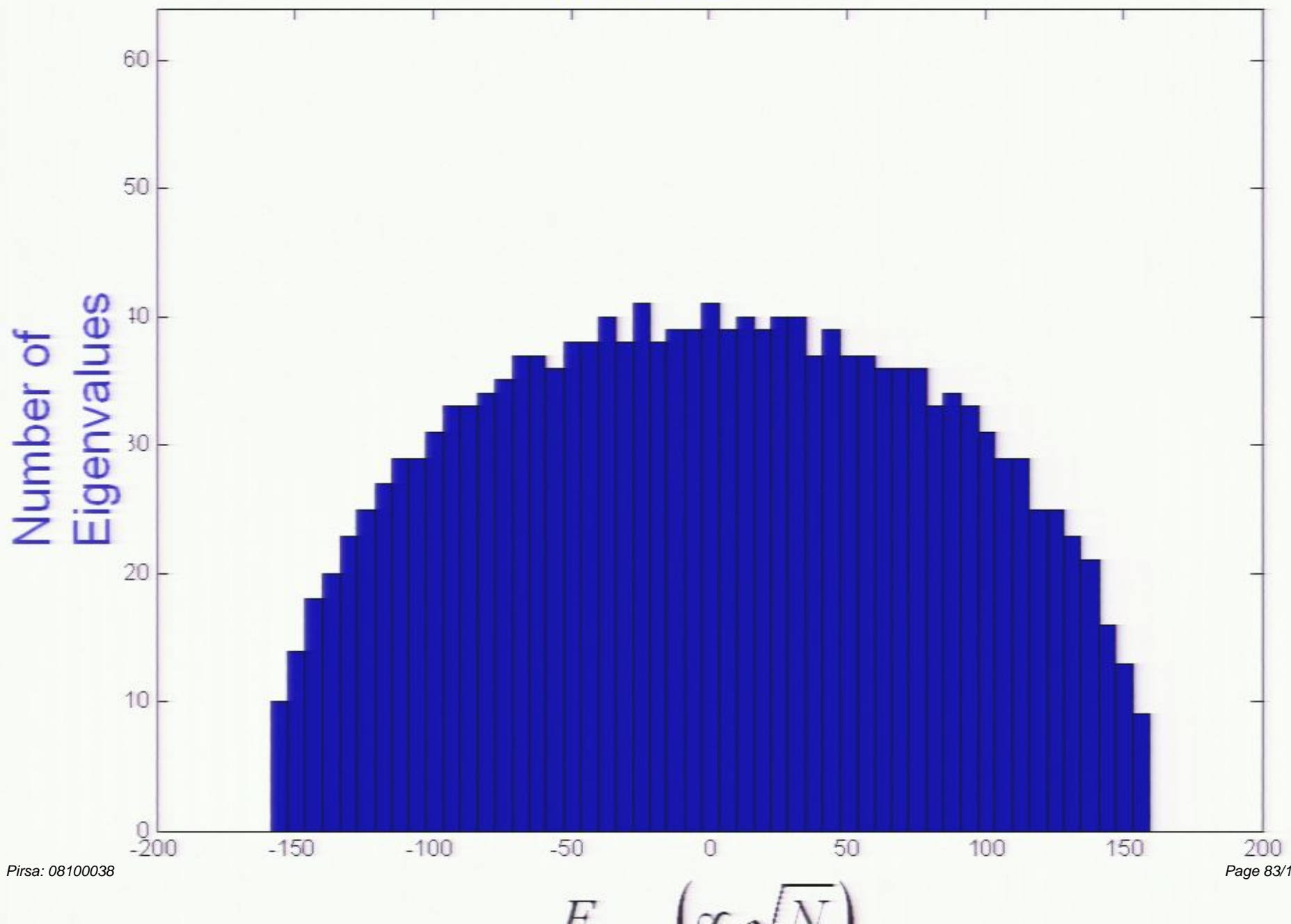
→ Generate a random Hamiltonian by selecting each matrix element from a normal distribution with width  $\sigma_E$

→ Plot a histogram of the eigenvalues of the resulting Hamiltonian

N=100



N=1600



## Wigner semicircle rule

$$\frac{dN}{dE} = a \frac{N_R}{E_m} \sqrt{1 - \left( \frac{E}{E_m} \right)^2}$$

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Density of  
states

## Wigner semicircle rule

The diagram shows the Wigner semicircle rule equation with several annotations in blue boxes and red circles/arrows:

- O(1) const.**: A box pointing to the constant  $a$ .
- Size of H**: A box pointing to the term  $\frac{N_R}{E_m}$ .
- Density of states**: A box pointing to the derivative  $\frac{dN}{dE}$ .

$$\frac{dN}{dE} = a \frac{N_R}{E_m} \sqrt{1 - \left(\frac{E}{E_m}\right)^2}$$

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The diagram shows the equation  $\frac{dN}{dE} = a \frac{N_R}{E_m} \sqrt{1 - \left(\frac{E}{E_m}\right)^2}$  with several annotations in blue boxes and red arrows:

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**N.B.**  $\sigma_E \propto \frac{E_M}{\sqrt{N_R}}$

## Wigner semicircle rule

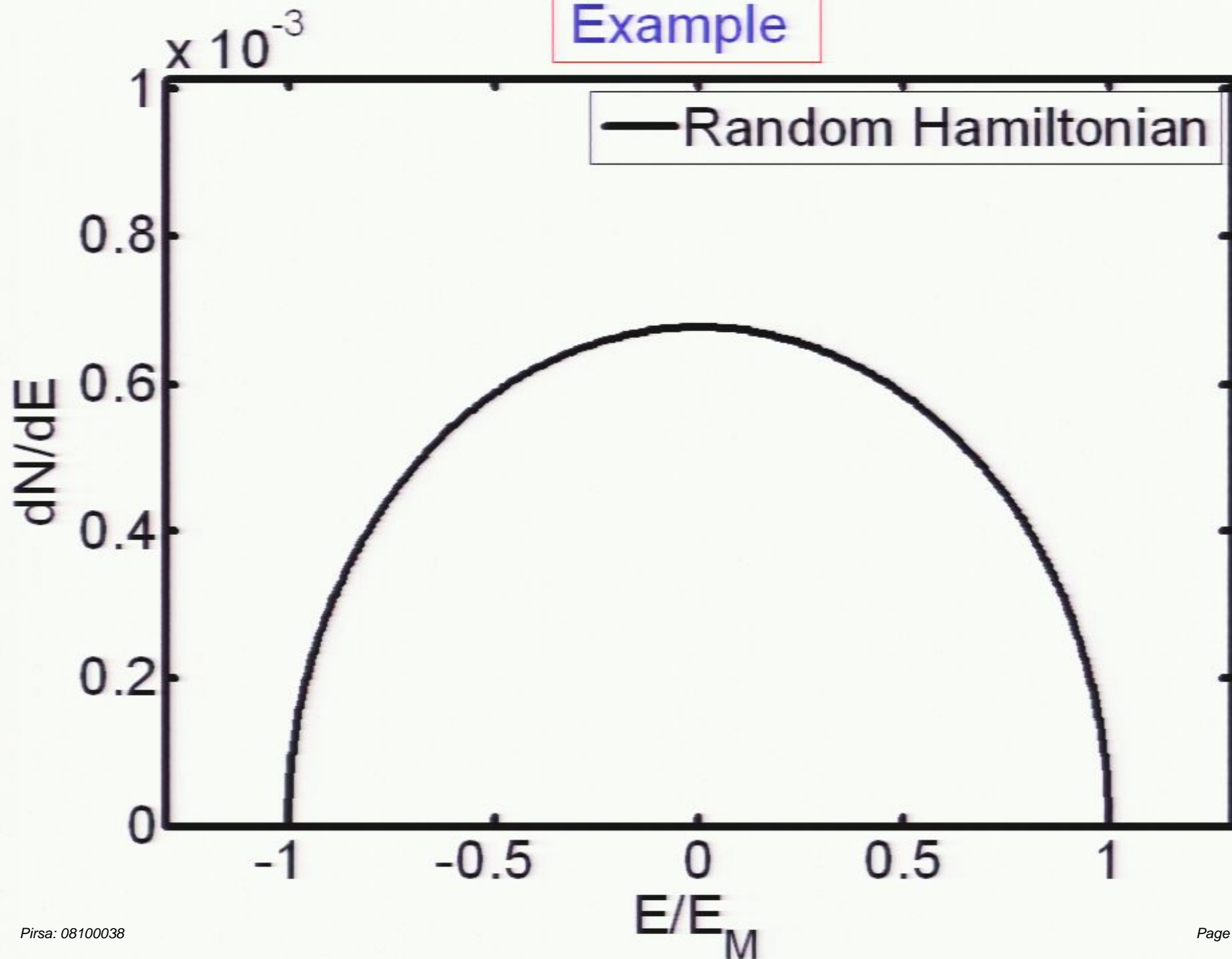
Diagram illustrating the Wigner semicircle rule equation and its components:

$$\frac{dN}{dE} = a \frac{N_R}{E_m} \sqrt{1 - \left( \frac{E}{E_m} \right)^2}$$

Annotations and components:

- O(1) const.**: Points to the constant  $a$ .
- Size of H**: Points to  $N_R$  (Number of Random Matrix elements).
- Density of states**: Points to  $\frac{dN}{dE}$ .
- Max eigenvalue**: Points to  $E_m$  (Maximum eigenvalue).
- Works for many non-Gaussian distributions for the matrix elements**: A red box highlighting the applicability of the rule.
- N.B.**: Note below the equation.
- Equation below N.B.**:  $\sigma_E \propto \frac{E_M}{\sqrt{N_R}}$

## Example



## Wigner semicircle rule

Diagram illustrating the Wigner semicircle rule, showing the relationship between the density of states and the matrix elements of the Hamiltonian.

The equation is:

$$\frac{dN}{dE} = a \frac{N_R}{E_m} \sqrt{1 - \left( \frac{E}{E_m} \right)^2}$$

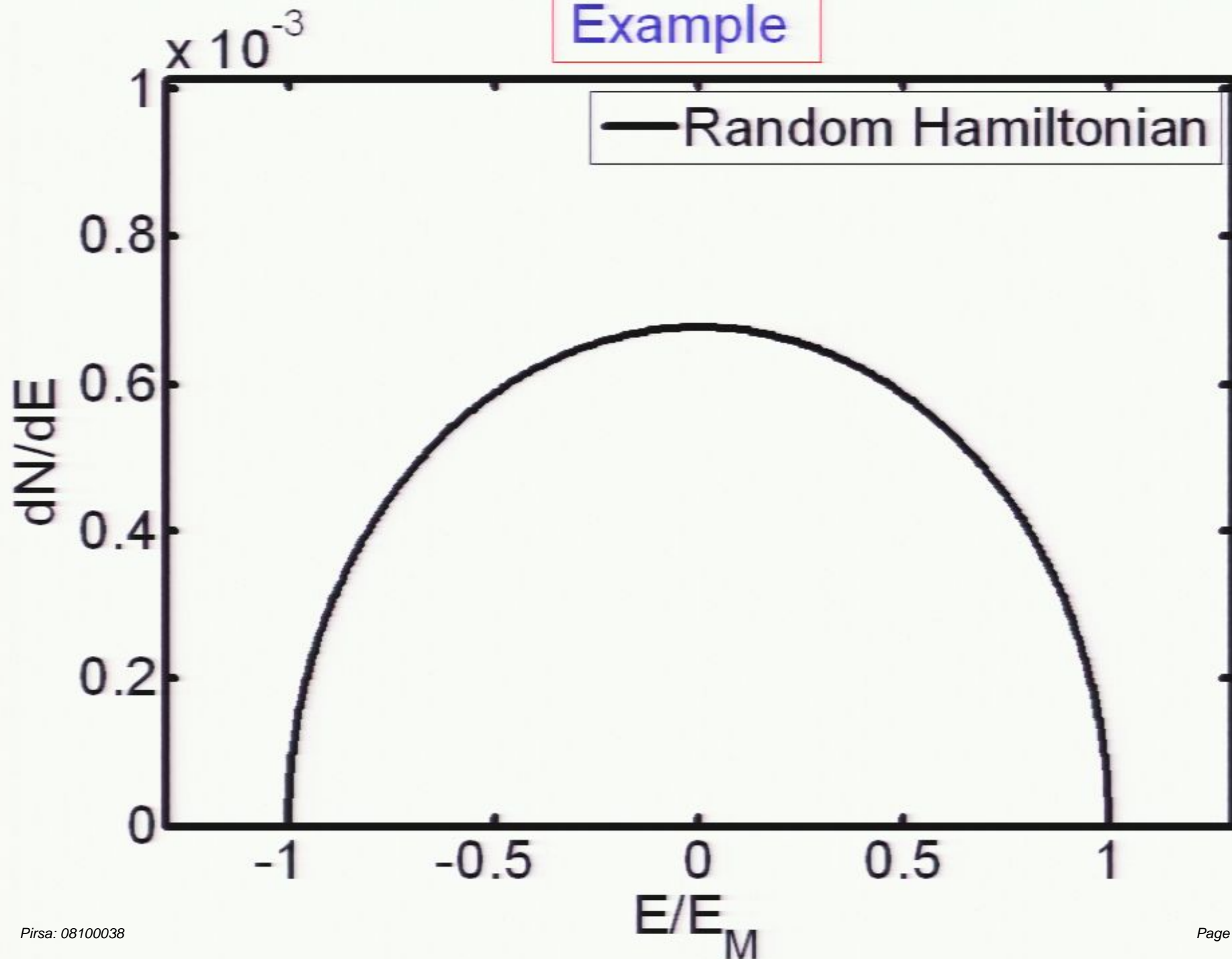
Annotations:

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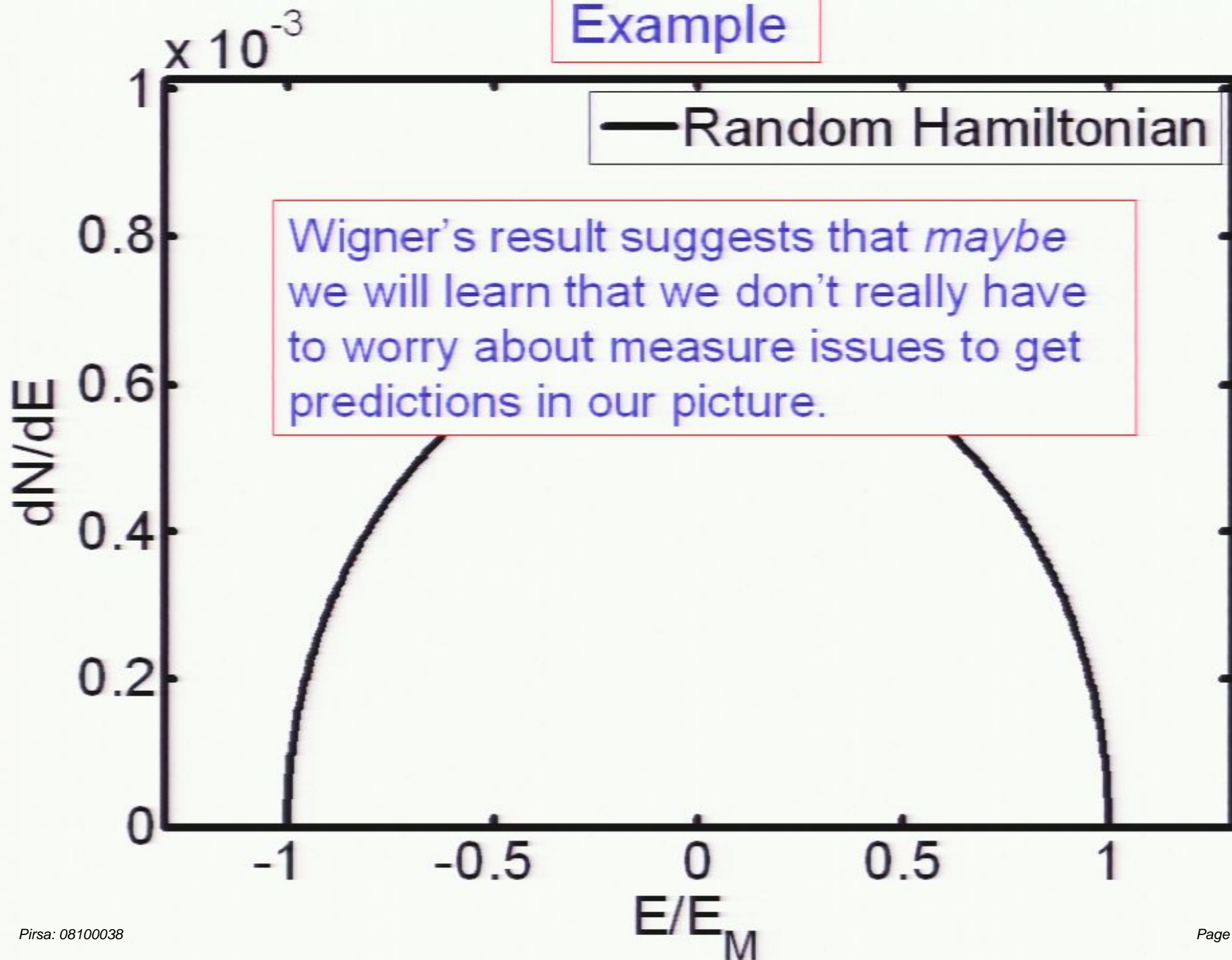
**Works for many non-Gaussian distributions for the matrix elements**

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## Example



## Example



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A: AA & Iglesias '07

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1+1 Free massless  
Bosons:

$$\left. \frac{dN}{dE} \right|_{FT} = \frac{B}{E} \exp \left\{ b \left( \frac{E}{\Delta k} \right)^{1/2} \right\}$$

O(1)  
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(similar expression for  
1+1 free Fermions)

well known CFT result

$$\left. \frac{dN}{dE} \right|_{FT} = \frac{B}{E} \exp \left\{ b \left( \frac{E}{\Delta k} \right)^{(d-1)/d} \right\}$$

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(dimensions appear in  $b$ )

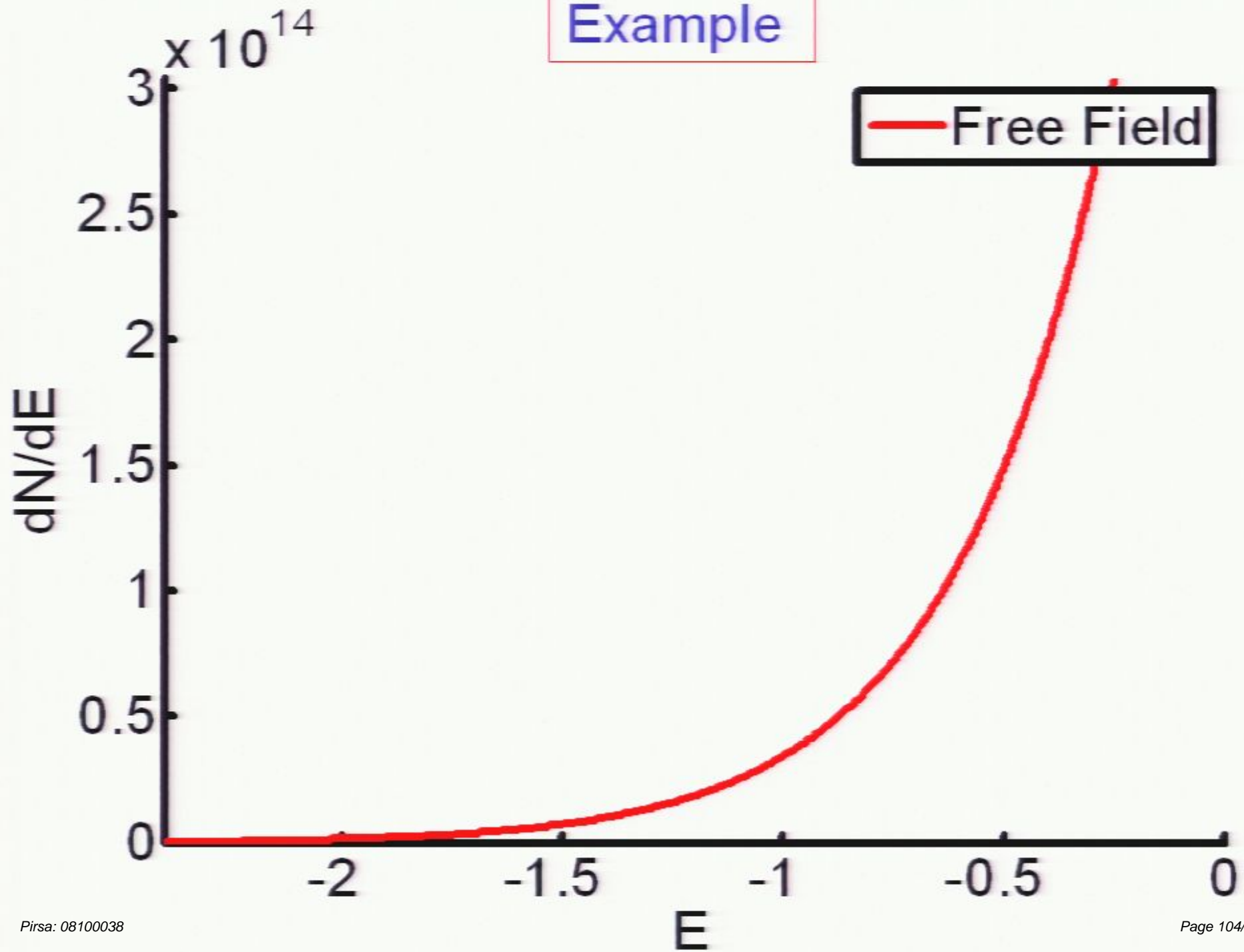
We consider generalized form

$$\left. \frac{dN}{dE} \right|_{FT} = \frac{B}{E} \exp \left\{ b \left( \frac{E}{\Delta k} \right)^\alpha \right\}$$

→ A comment about gravity:

- Gravity critical part of known laws
- $S_{BH}$  (or perhaps)  $S_{\Lambda}$  dominates  $S_{Univ}$
- BUT: Not sure we need all those BH states to describe what we really know. Full GR & BH entropy may be a gross extrapolation.
- Stick to FT for now (which includes graviton)

## Example



## Wigner semicircle rule

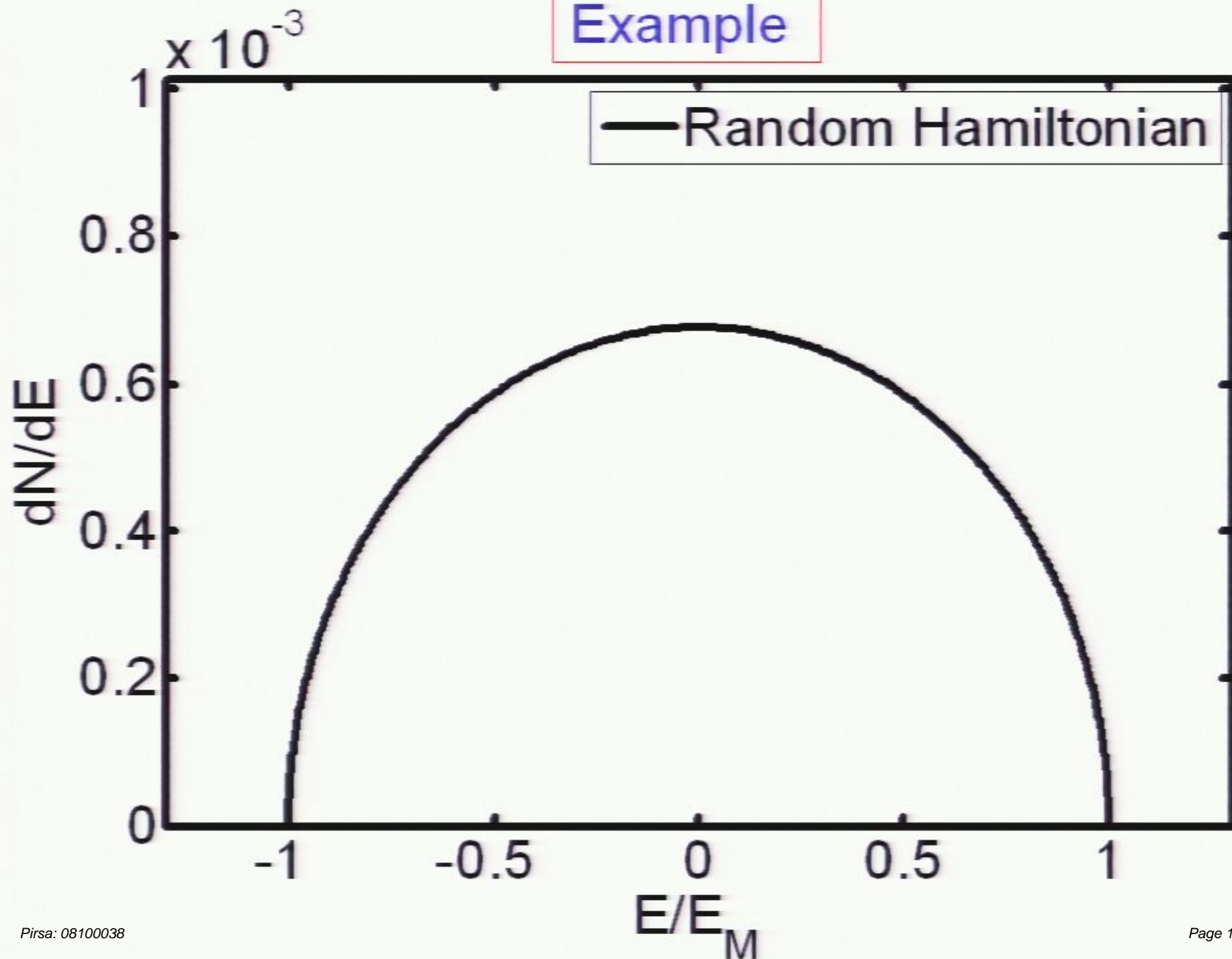
$$\frac{dN}{dE} = a \frac{N_R}{E_m} \sqrt{1 - \left( \frac{E}{E_m} \right)^2}$$

Diagram illustrating the Wigner semicircle rule equation with annotations:

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## Example



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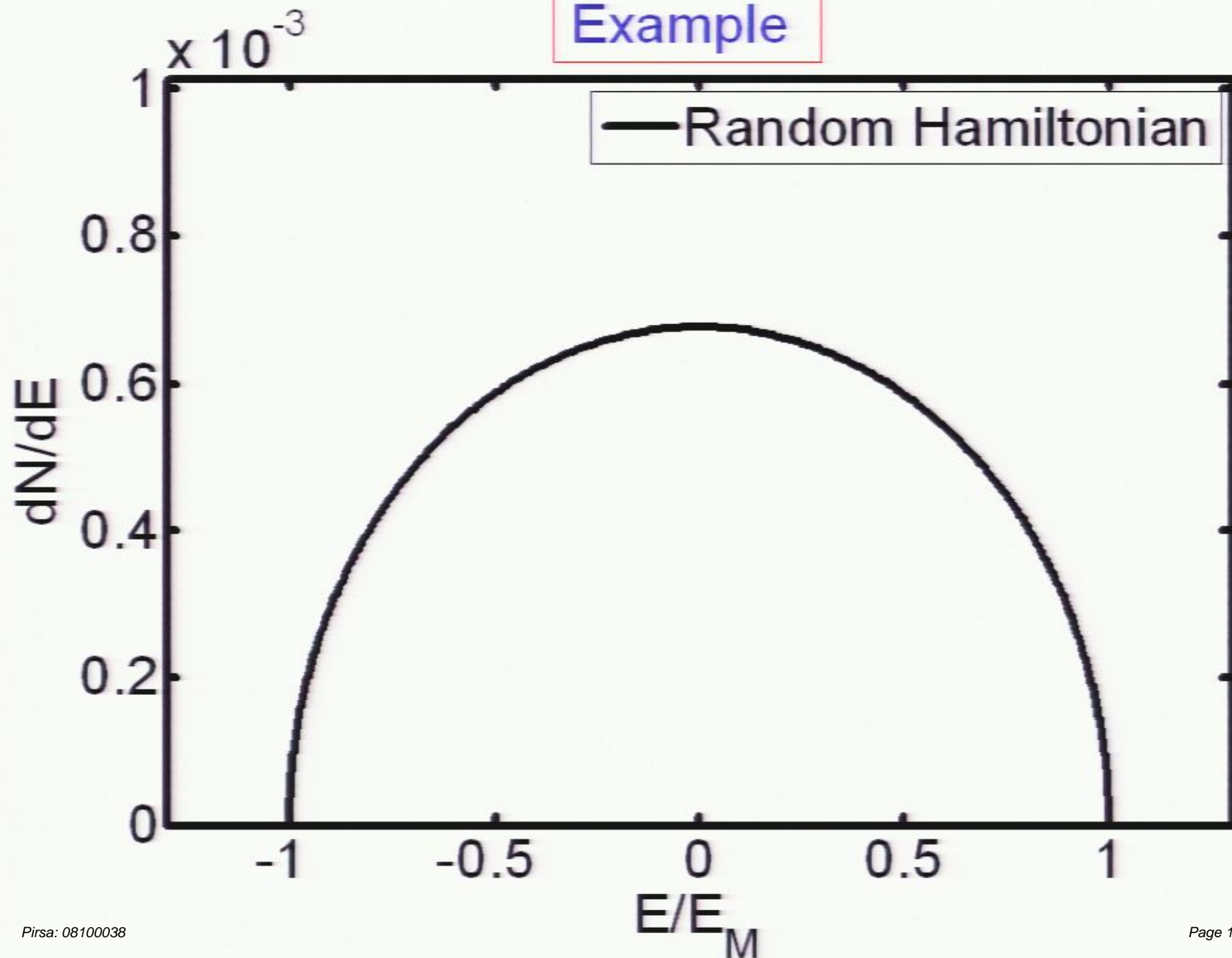
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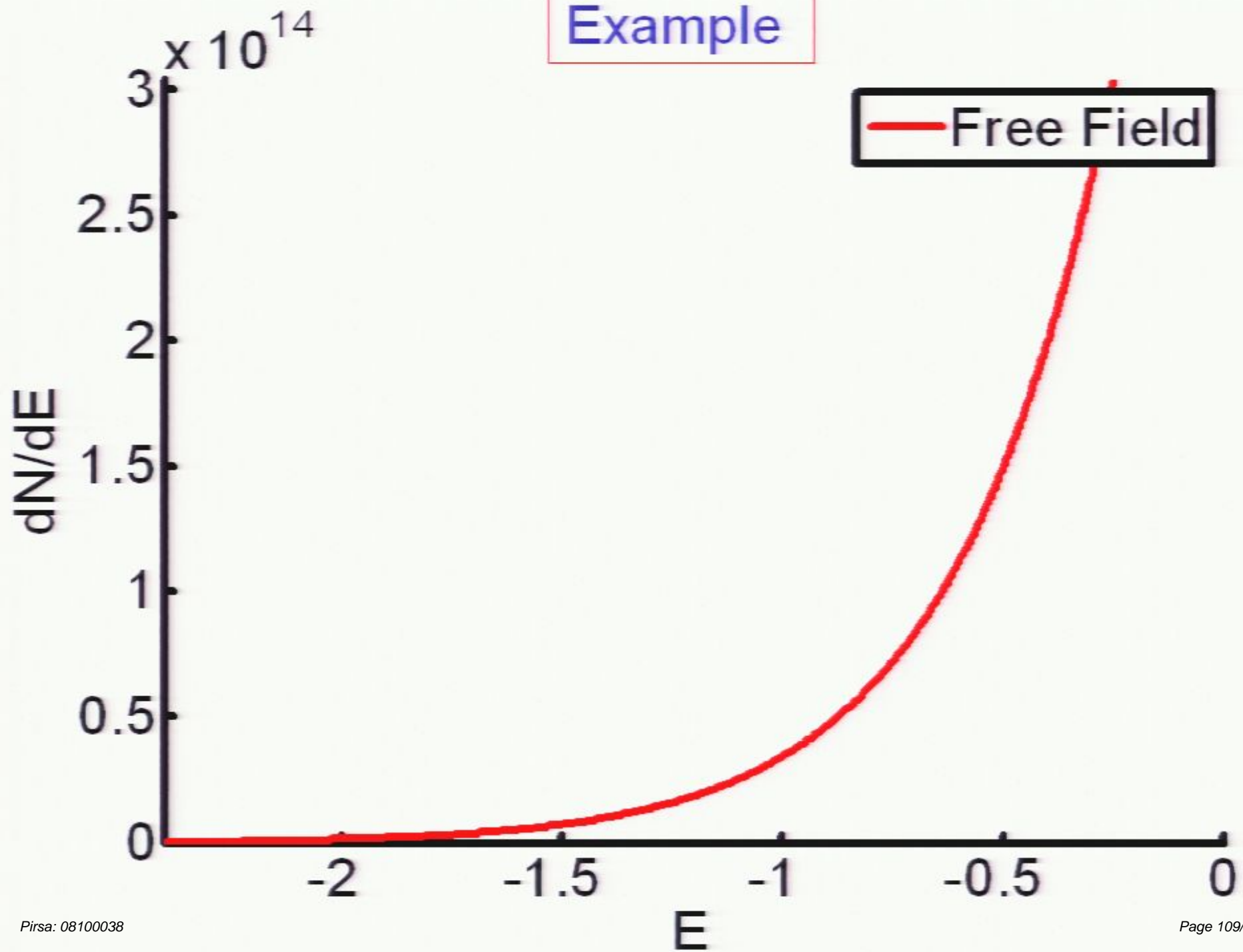
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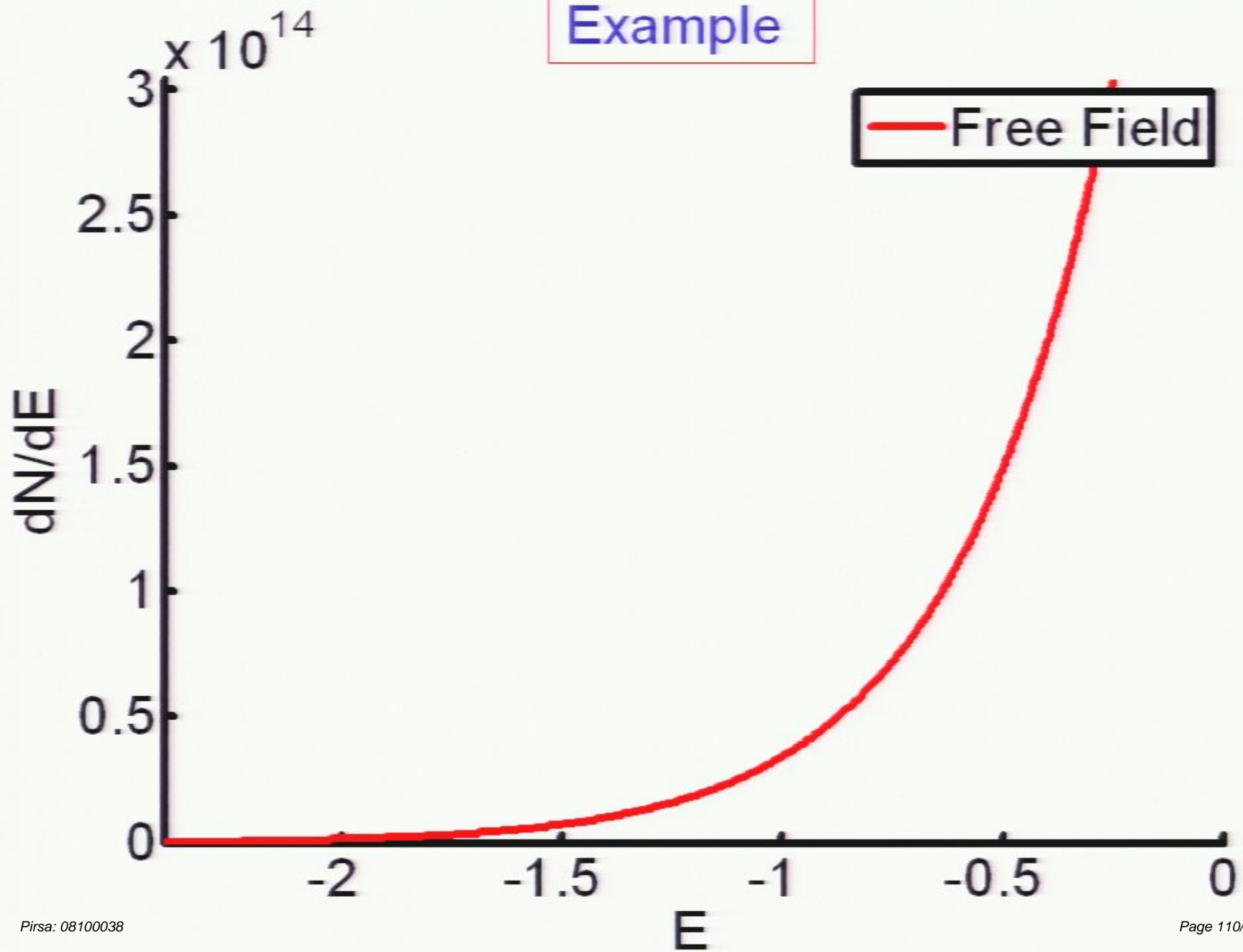
## Example



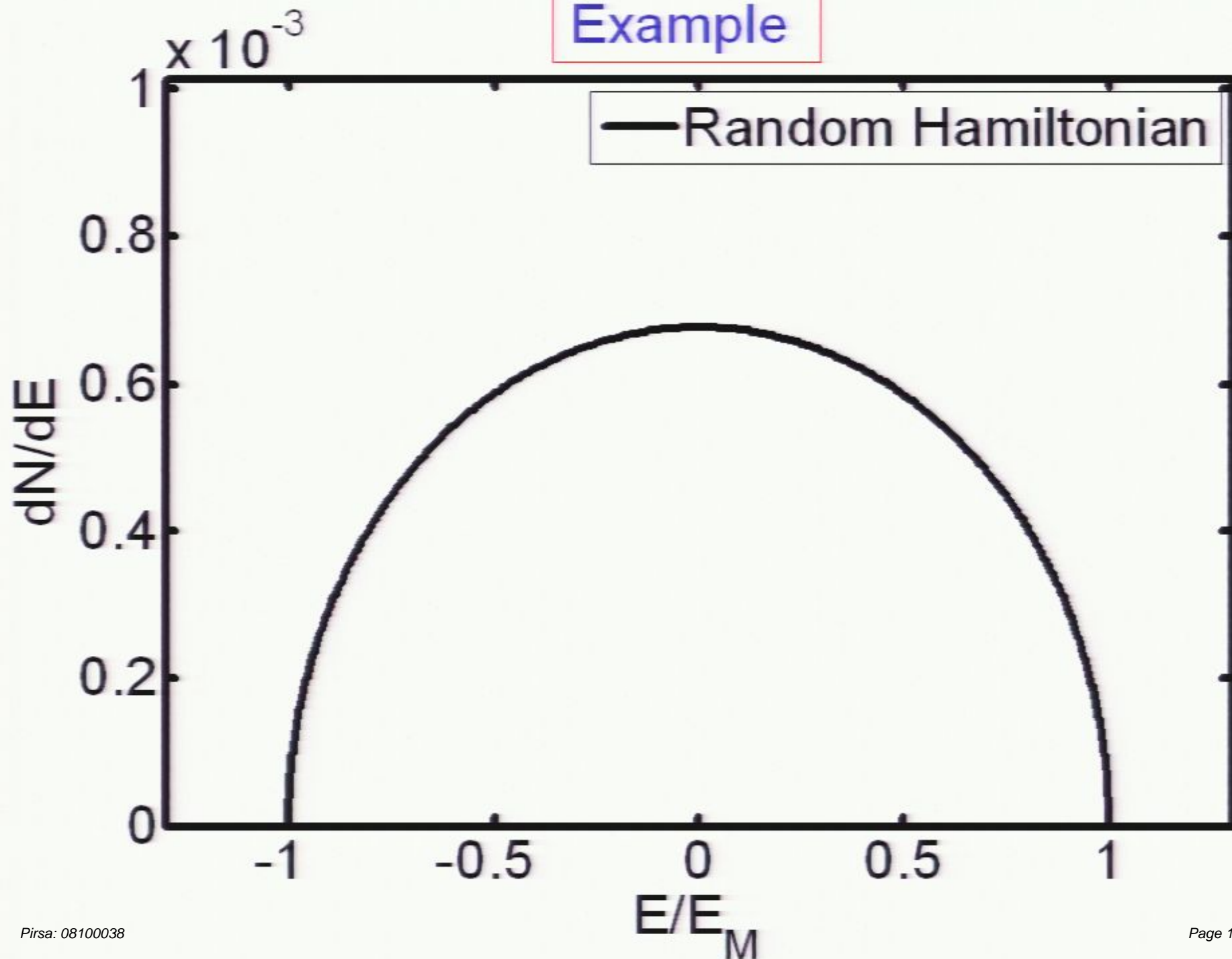
## Example



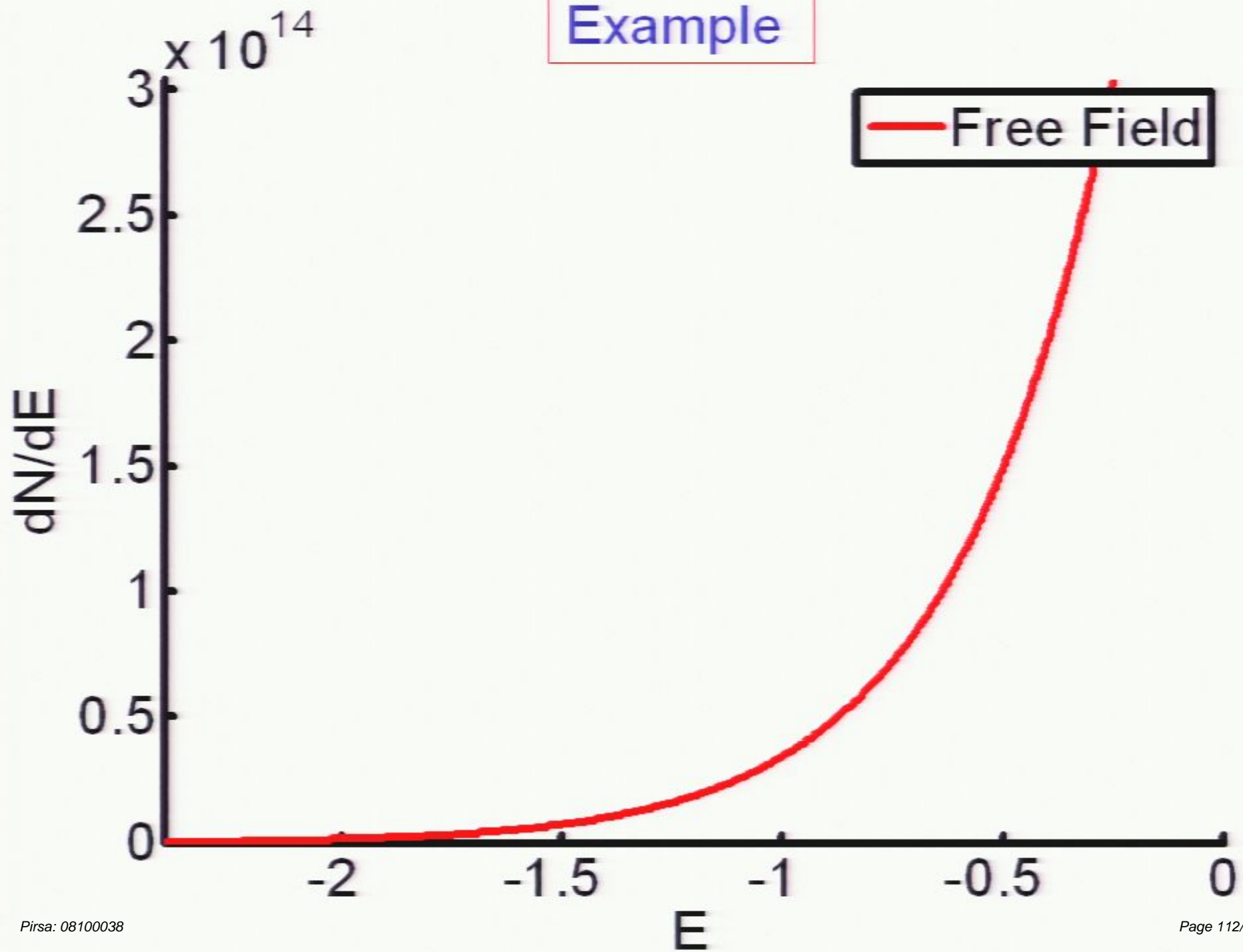
## Example



## Example



## Example



3iii) Compare “locally” using a Taylor series

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- Allow energy offset between two formulas
- Generalize Wigner formula to

$$\left. \frac{dN}{dE} \right|_R = a \frac{N_R}{E_m} \left( 1 - \left( \frac{E - E_S}{E_m} \right)^\beta \right)^\gamma$$

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$$\left. \frac{dN}{dE} \right|_R = a \frac{N_R}{E_m} \left( 1 - \left( \frac{E - E_S}{E_m} \right)^{\beta \gamma} \right)$$

Just curious  
(how  
sensitive?)

Energy shift

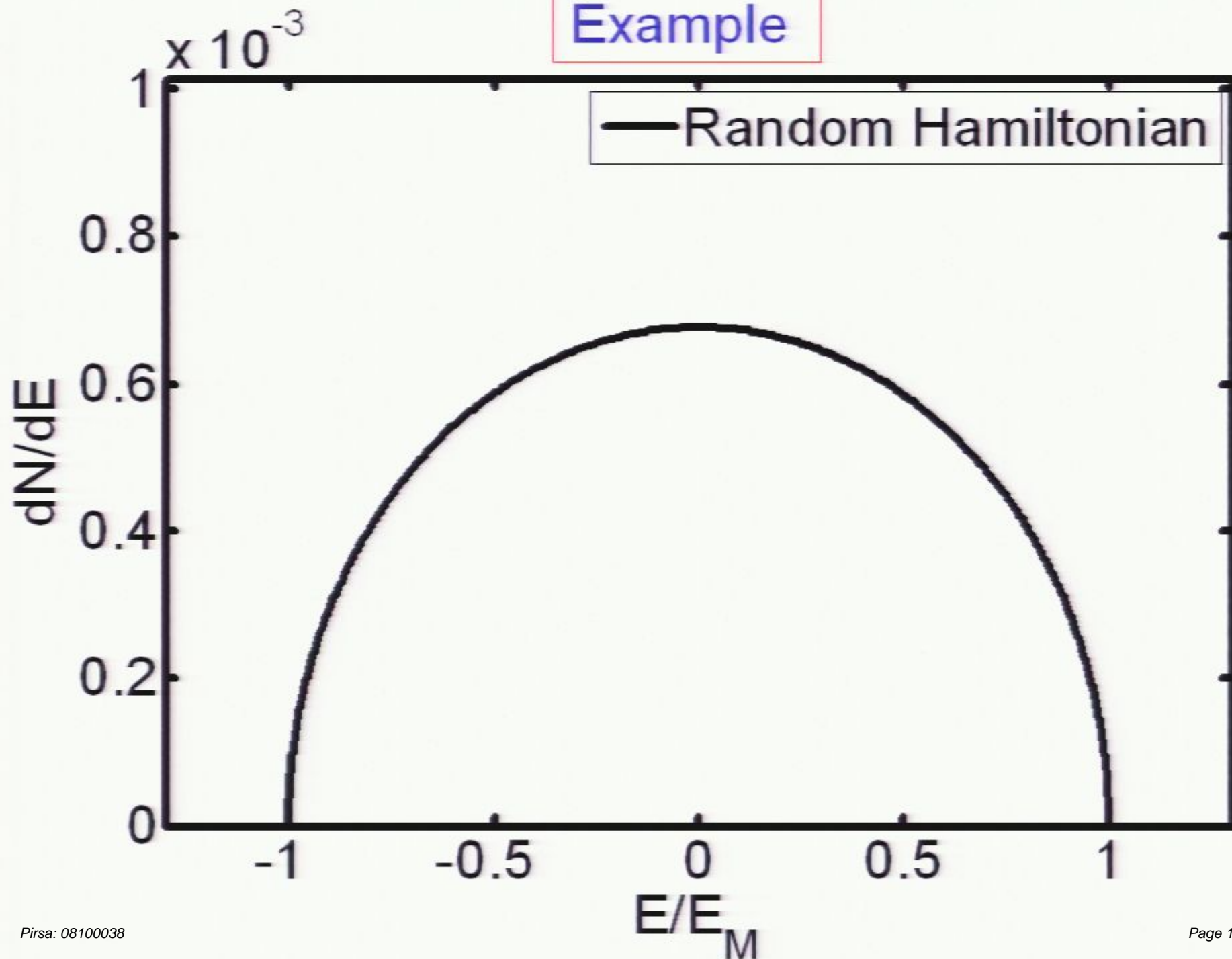
Taylor expand around some energy  $E_0$  and set **0<sup>th</sup>** order terms equal. Solve for  $N_R$  to get

$$N_R = \left( \frac{B}{\frac{2}{\pi} \left[ 1 - \left( \frac{E_0 - E_S}{E_M} \right)^2 \right]^{1/2}} \frac{E_M}{E_0} \right) \exp \left\{ b \left( c \frac{E_0}{\Delta k} \right)^\alpha \right\}$$

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Pisa: 08100038

## Example



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Pisa: 08100038

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“Energy of the universe”

$$N_R = \left( \dots \right) \exp \left\{ b \left( c \frac{E_0}{\Delta k} \right)^\alpha \right\}$$

k-space lattice gap ( $2\pi/\text{box size}$ )

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Dominant part of expression ( $\rightarrow N_R$  **exponentially large**)

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lattice size)

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Dominant part of expression ( $\rightarrow N_R$  **exponentially large**)

lattice size)

“0<sup>th</sup> order equality ok”  
(sets  $N_R$ )

Actually, sets a lower bound on  $N_R$

$\left. \frac{dN}{dE} \right|_R = \left. \frac{dN}{dE} \right|_F$  at 0<sup>th</sup> order

→ A comment on the time dependence of H

$$|\phi(t_i)\rangle_R \equiv \sum_j \alpha_{ij} |j\rangle_R$$

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- Without loss of generality, assume a time independent H until one has taken N time steps.
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$$\frac{m_P}{H_0} \approx 10^{60}$$

$$N_R \sim \exp \left\{ b \left( c \frac{E_0}{\Delta k} \right)^\alpha \right\} > 10^{50}$$

Taylor expand around some energy  $E_0$  and set  
 0<sup>th</sup> and **1<sup>st</sup>** order terms equal.

$$-\frac{E_0}{E_0 - E_S} \frac{\left(\frac{E_0 - E_S}{E_m}\right)^2}{\left(1 - \left[\frac{E_0 - E_S}{E_M}\right]^2\right)} = \alpha b \left(c \frac{E_0}{\Delta k}\right)^\alpha$$

$$\left.\frac{dN}{dE}\right|_R = \left.\frac{dN}{dE}\right|_F \text{ at 1<sup>st</sup> order}$$

Pisa: 08100038

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“Energy of the universe”

Huge number

k-space lattice gap ( $2\pi/\text{box size}$ )

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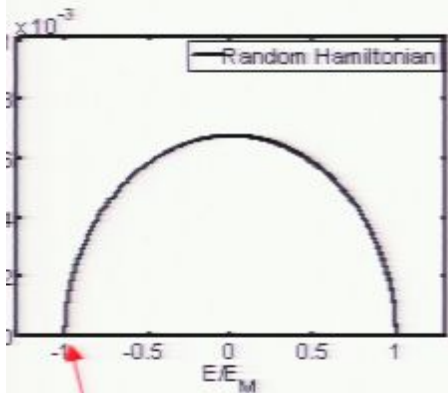
Extremely close to unity

k-space lattice gap ( $2\pi/\text{box size}$ )

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“Energy of the universe”



$$\frac{\left(\frac{E_0 - E_S}{E_m}\right)^2}{\left(1 - \left[\frac{E_0 - E_S}{E_M}\right]^2\right)} = \alpha b \left( c \frac{E_0}{\Delta k} \right)^\alpha$$

Huge number

Close to edge of semicircle

Extremely close to unity

k-space lattice gap ( $2\pi/\text{box size}$ )

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Pirsa: 08100038

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$$E_s = E_0 + E_M (1 - \varepsilon)$$

extremely small

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Shift contribution from “energy of the universe”. Any relation to cosmological constant?

“1<sup>st</sup> order equality ok”  
(sets  $E_s$ )

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Taylor expand around some energy  $E_0$

**2<sup>nd</sup>** order terms can not be set equal. One gets

$$\frac{\left( \left. \frac{dN}{dE} \right|_F - \left. \frac{dN}{dE} \right|_R \right)_2}{\left. \frac{dN}{dE} \right|_{E_0}} \approx \left( \left( \frac{E_0}{\Delta k} \right)^\alpha \frac{\Delta E}{E_0} \right)^2 \equiv \Delta_2$$

$$\left. \frac{dN}{dE} \right|_R \neq \left. \frac{dN}{dE} \right|_F \text{ at 2<sup>nd</sup> order}$$

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k-space lattice  
gap ( $2\pi/\text{box size}$ )

“Energy of  
universe”

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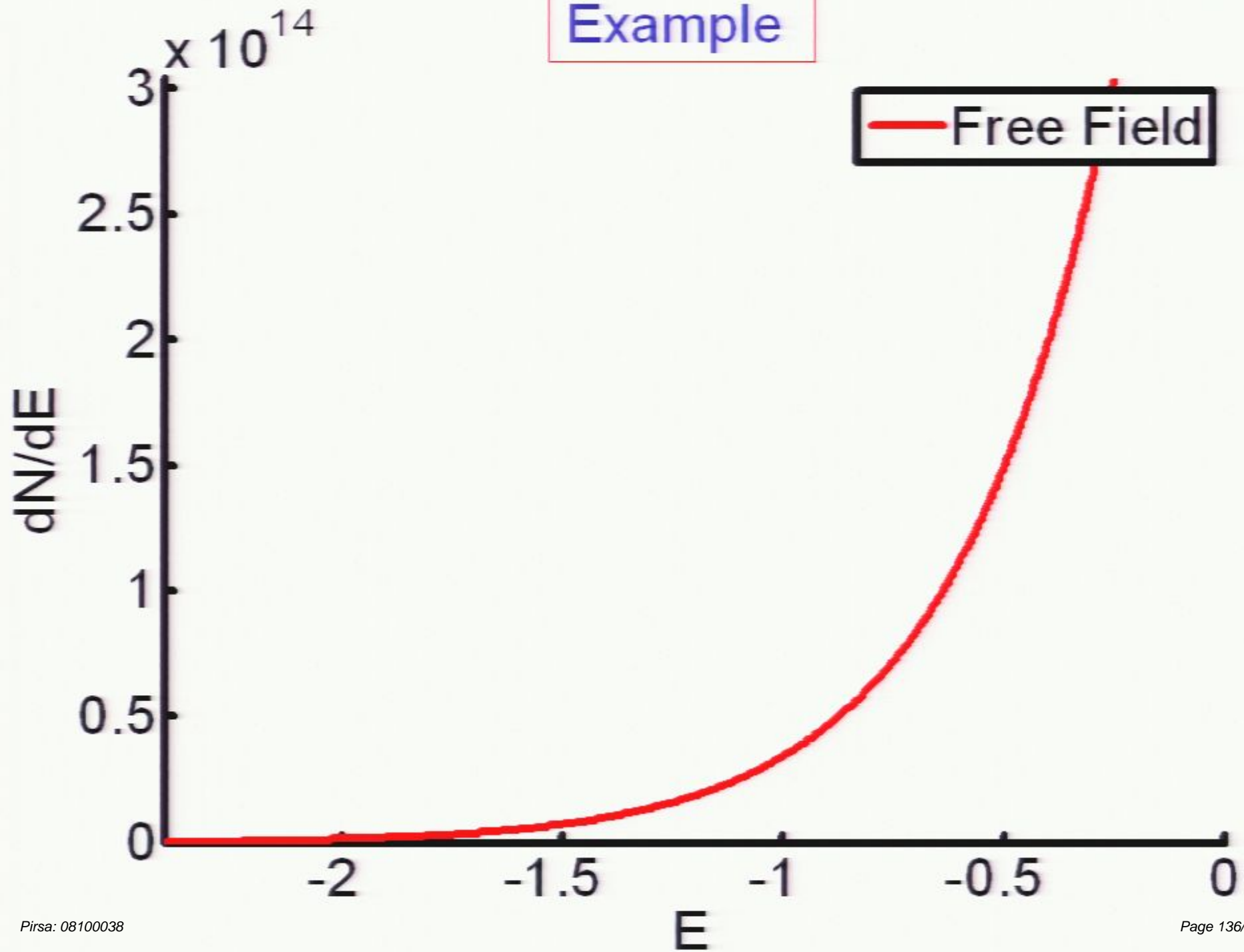
“Energy of  
universe”

$$\Delta E \leq \frac{\hbar}{\delta t}$$

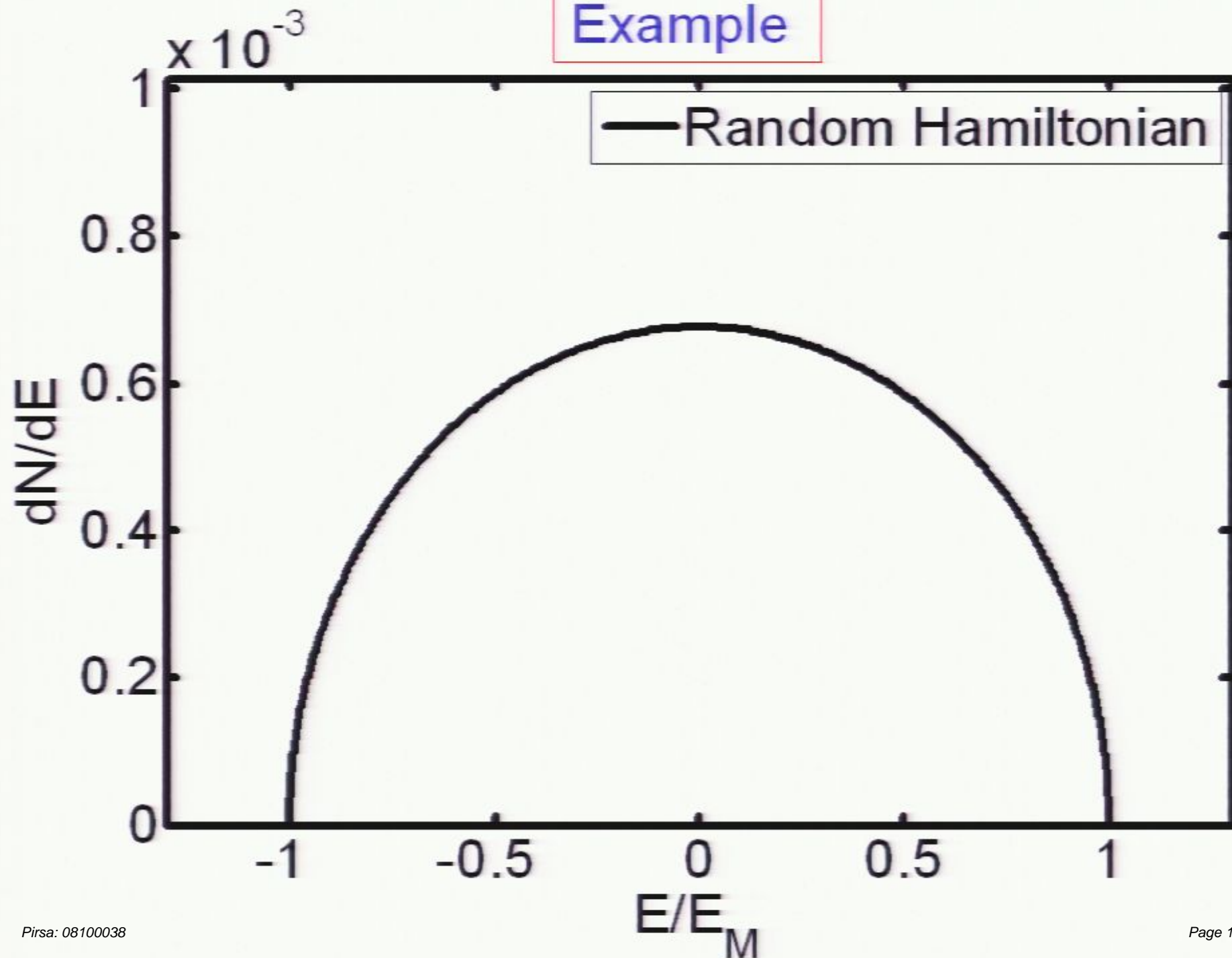
process with  
finest time  
resolution  
described by  
field theory

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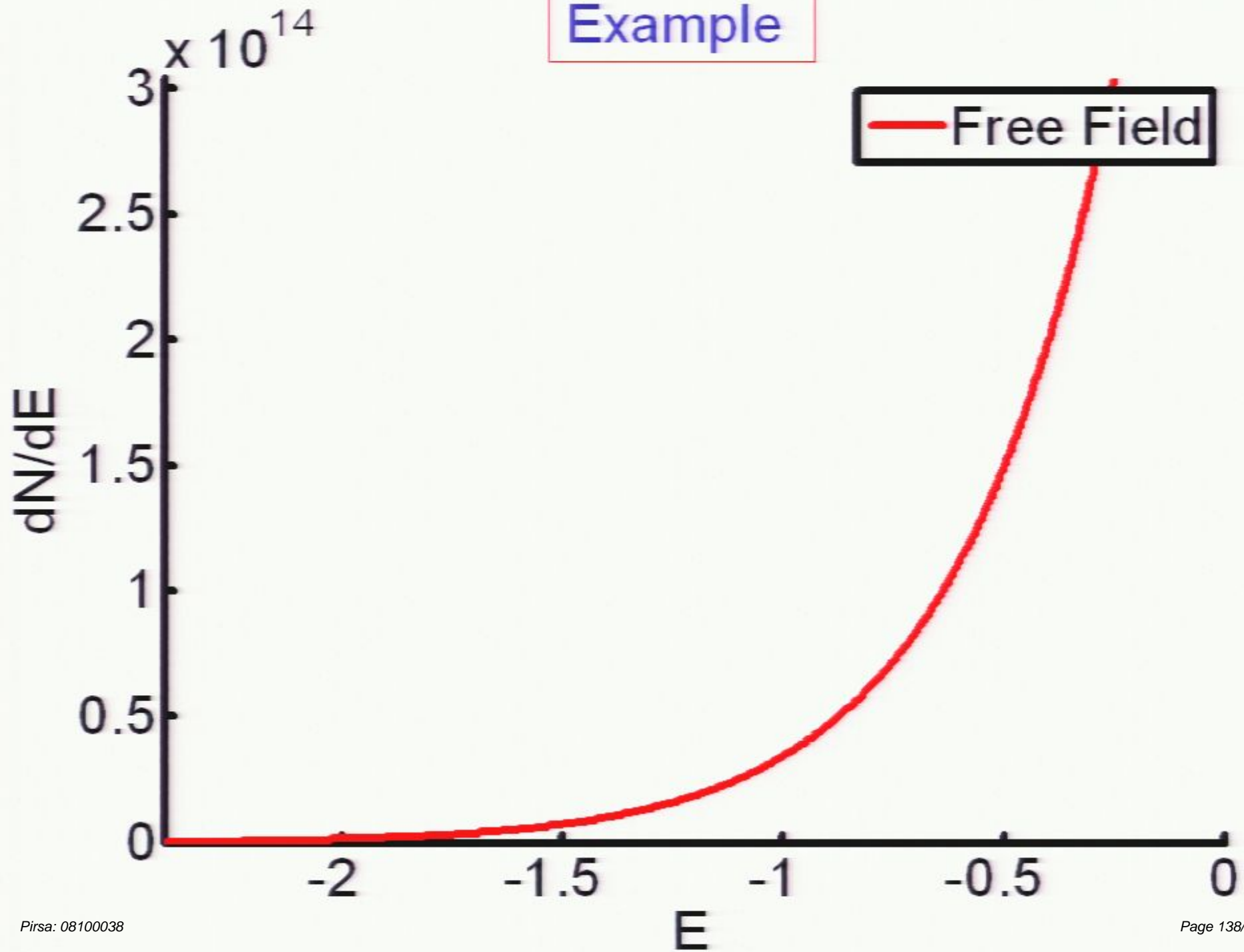
## Example



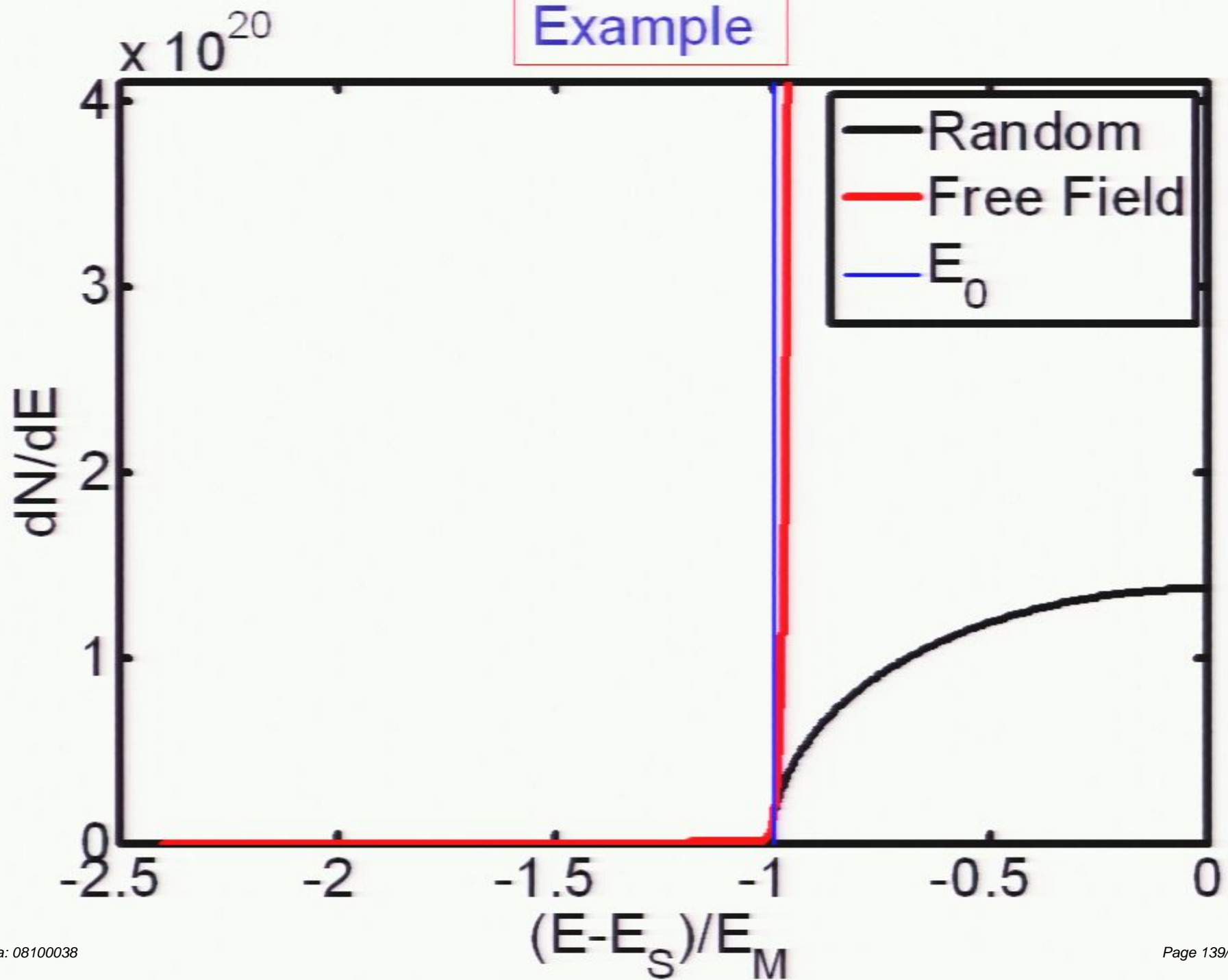
## Example



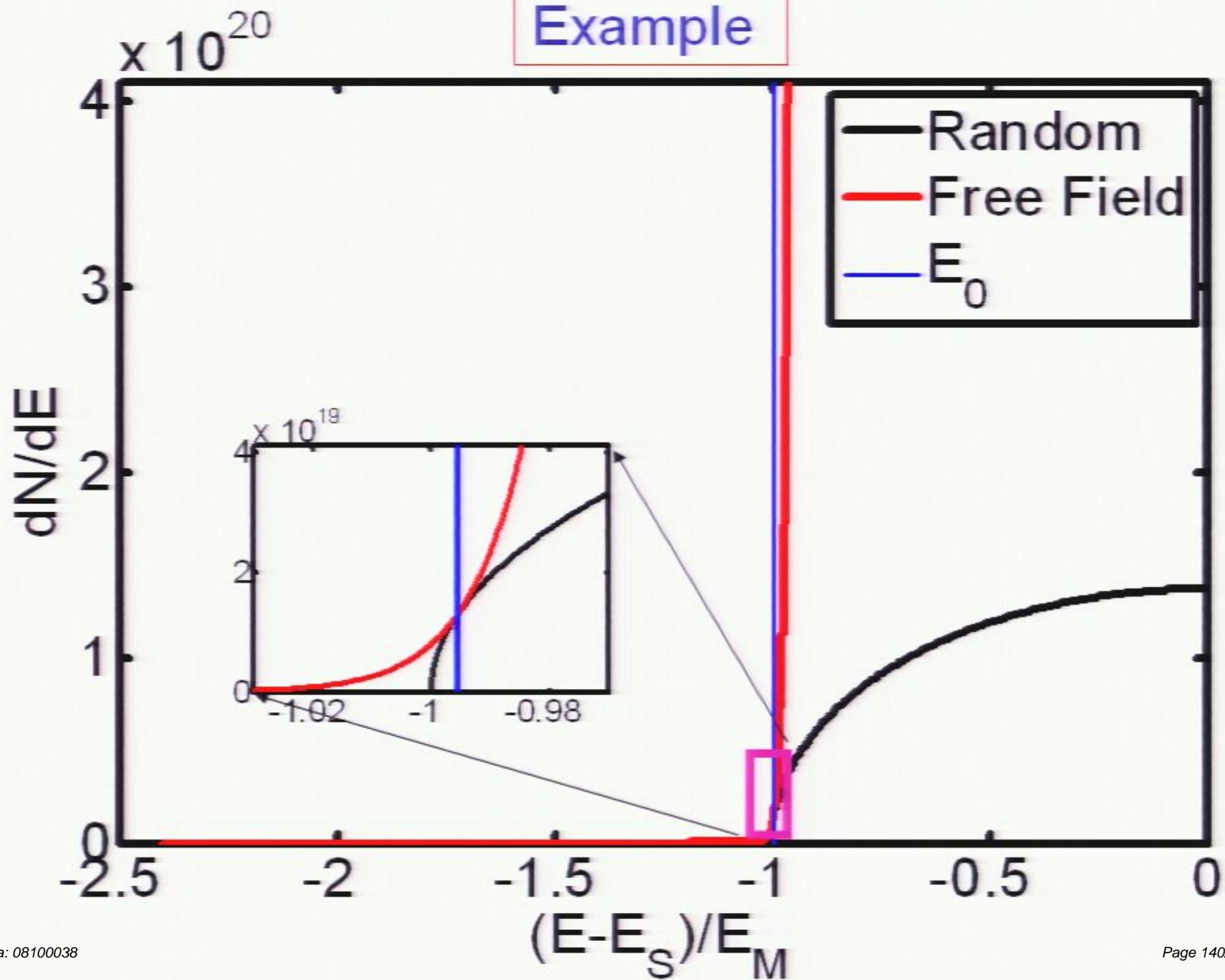
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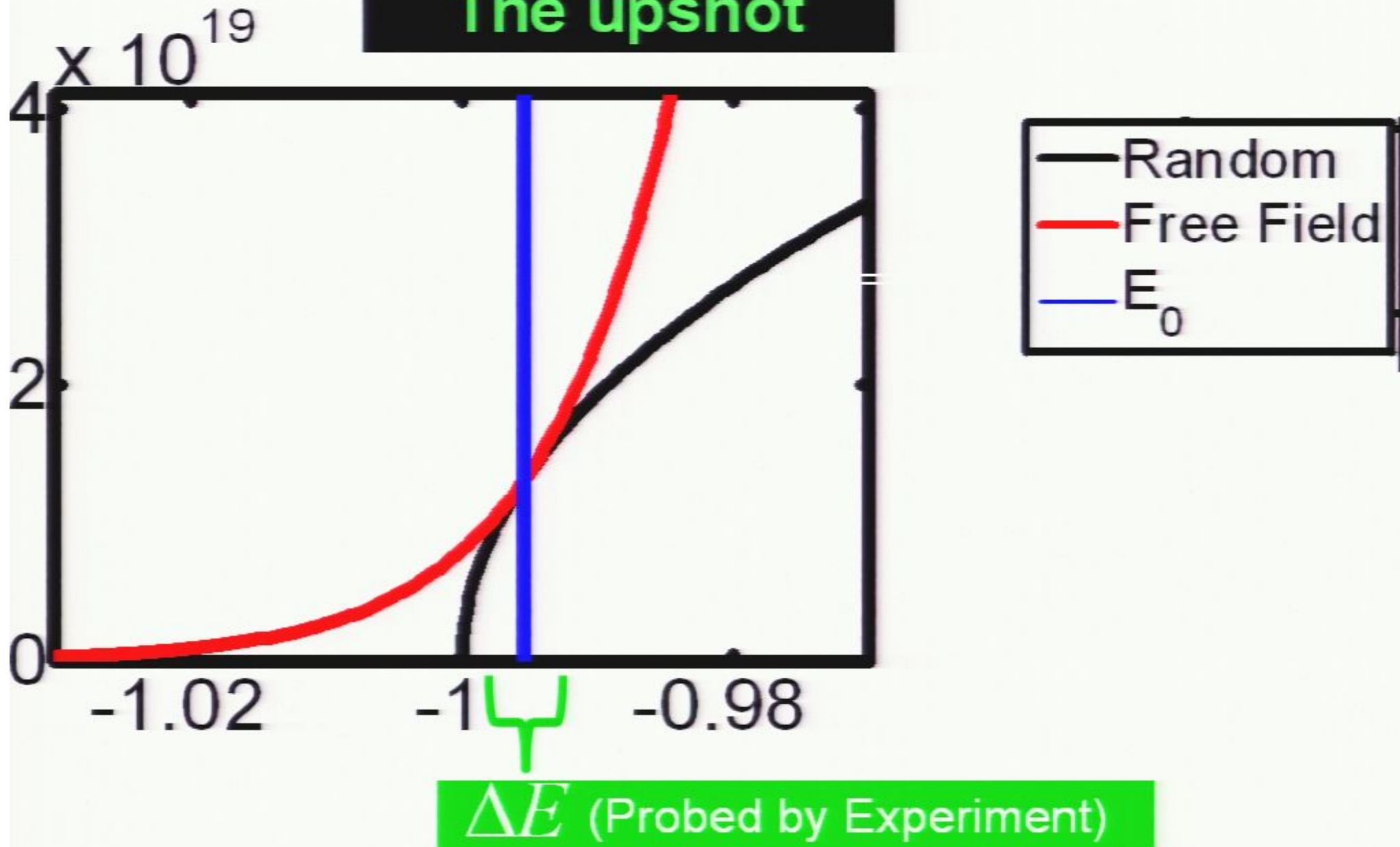
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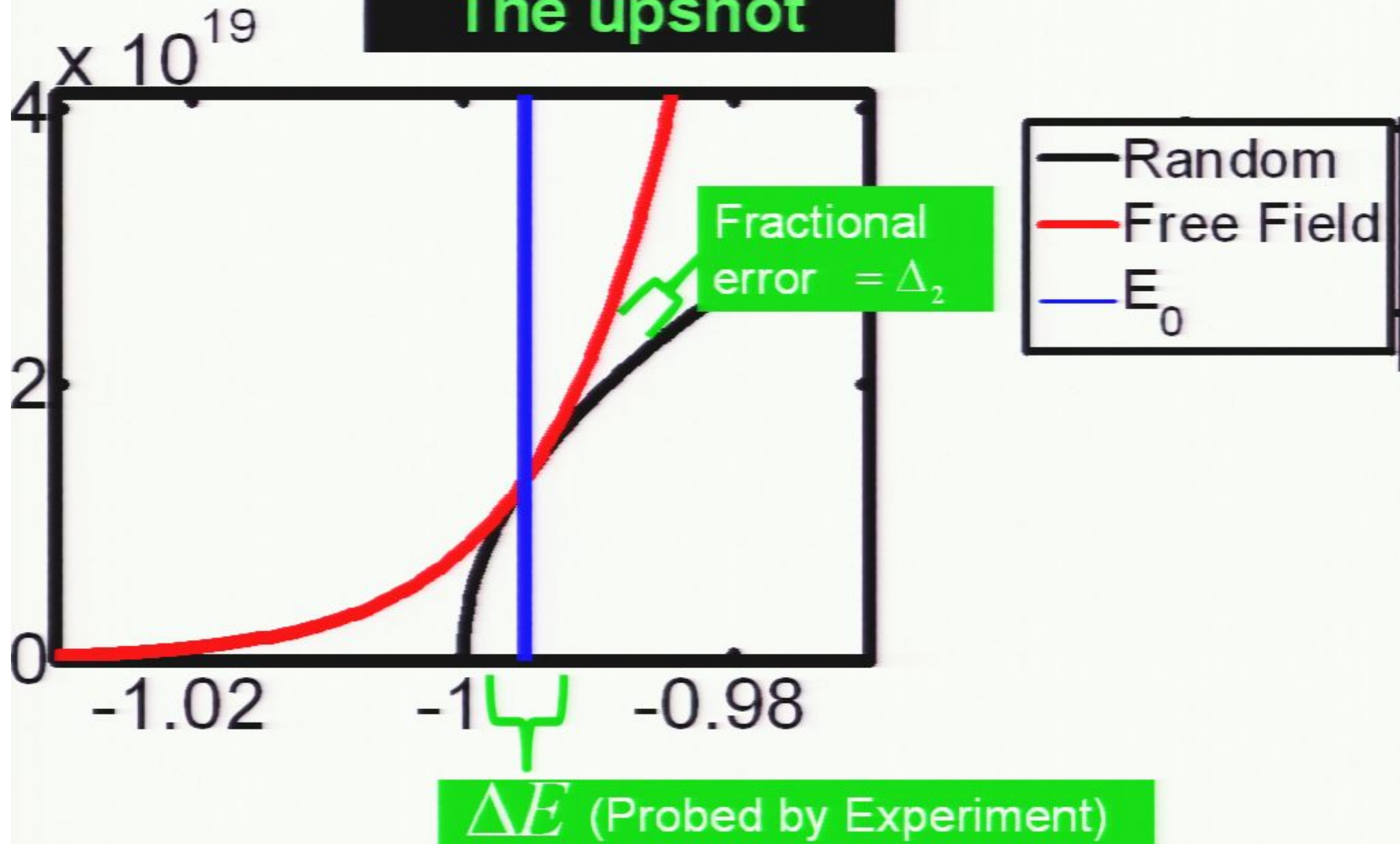
# Example



## The upshot



## The upshot



Numbers for evaluating

$$\Delta_2 = \left( \left( \frac{E_0}{\Delta k} \right)^\alpha \frac{\Delta E}{E_0} \right)^2$$

Numbers for evaluating  $\Delta_2 = \left( \left( \frac{E_0}{\Delta k} \right)^\alpha \frac{\Delta E}{E_0} \right)^2$

$$E_0 = \rho R_H^3 = 10^{80} \text{ GeV}$$

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Cosmology?  
Need gravity

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Some choices:

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Careful: Looking for *field theory* effects.

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1/2	$10^{-25}$	$10^3$	$10^{-24.5}$
1/2	$10^{-25}$	$10^{11}$	$10^{-16.5}$
1/2	$10^{-42}$	$10^3$	$10^{-16}$
1/2	$10^{-42}$	$10^{11}$	$10^{-8}$
3/4	$10^{-25}$	$10^3$	$10^{1.8}$
3/4	$10^{-25}$	$10^{11}$	$10^{9.8}$
3/4	$10^{-42}$	$10^3$	$10^{14.5}$
3/4	$10^{-42}$	$10^{11}$	$10^{22.5}$
1	$10^{-25}$	$10^3$	$10^{28}$
1	$10^{-25}$	$10^{11}$	$10^{36}$
1	$10^{-42}$	$10^3$	$10^{45}$
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1/2	$10^{-42}$	$10^{11}$	$10^{-8}$
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small (good)

large (bad)

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3/4	$10^{-25}$	$10^{11}$	$10^{9.8}$
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small (good)

medium  
(caution/  
interesting)

large (bad)

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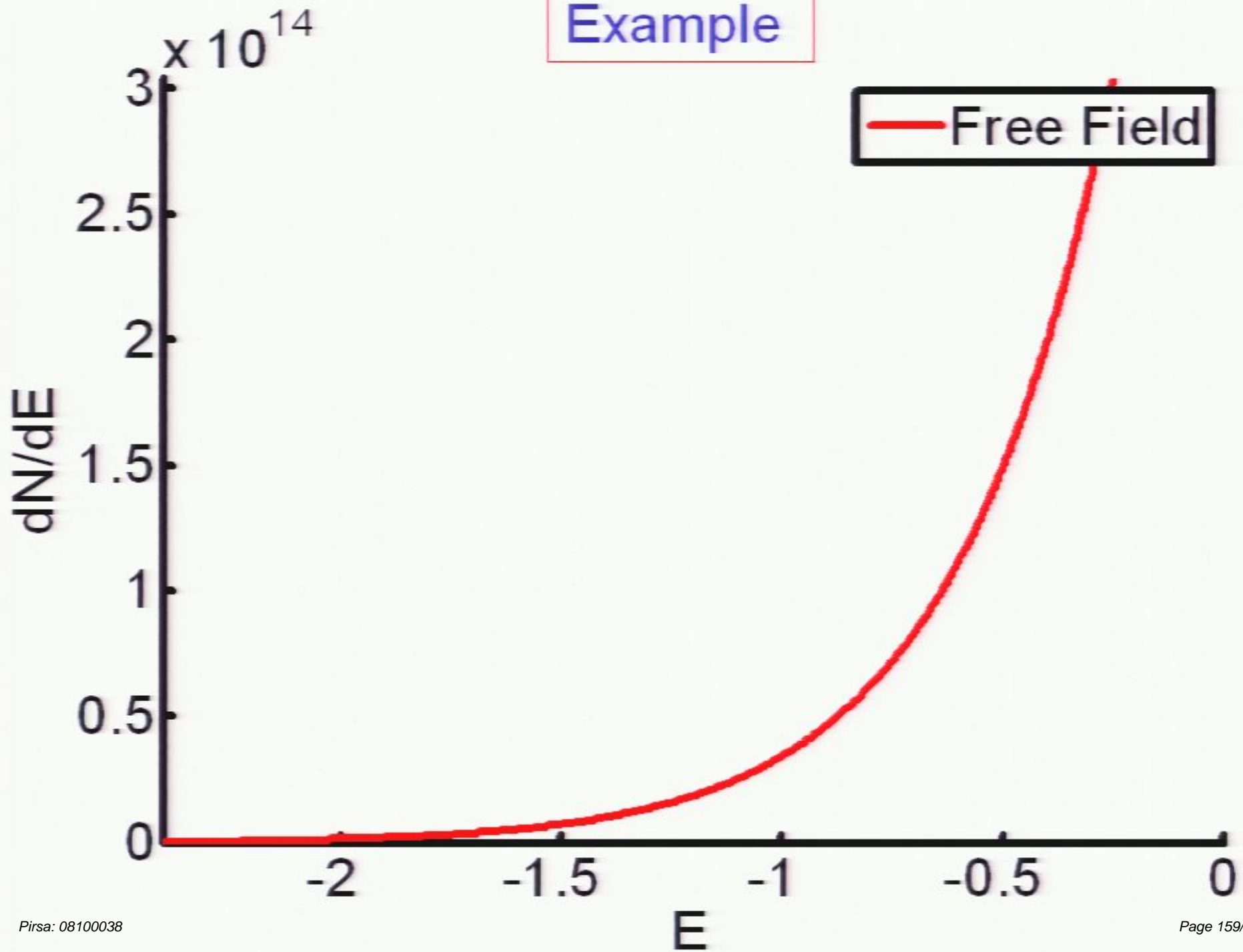
Expansion OK  
if  
 $\alpha = 1/2$   
(3/4?)

small (good)

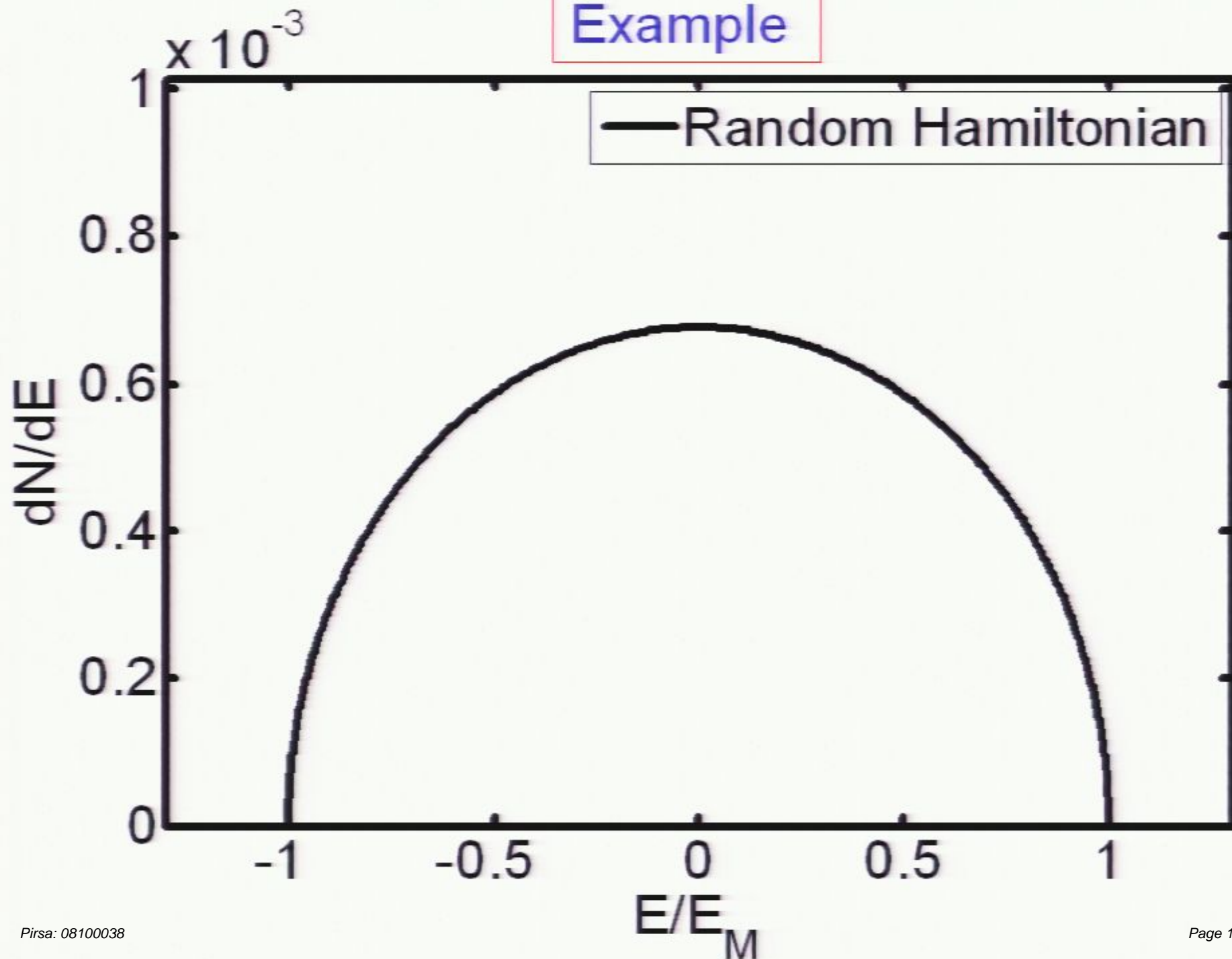
medium  
(caution/  
interesting)

large (bad)

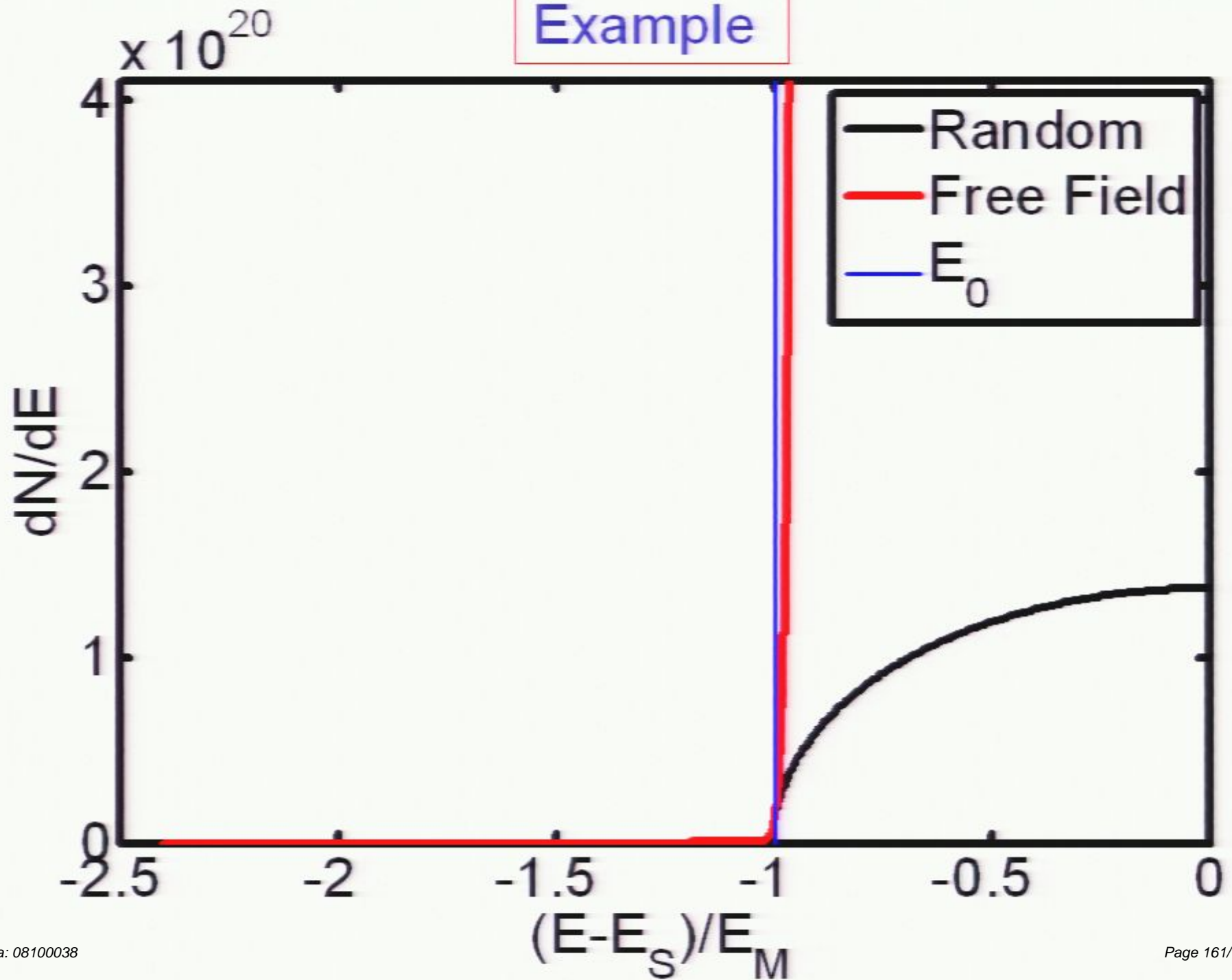
## Example



## Example



## Example



$$E_0 = \rho R_H^3 = 10^{80} \text{ GeV}$$

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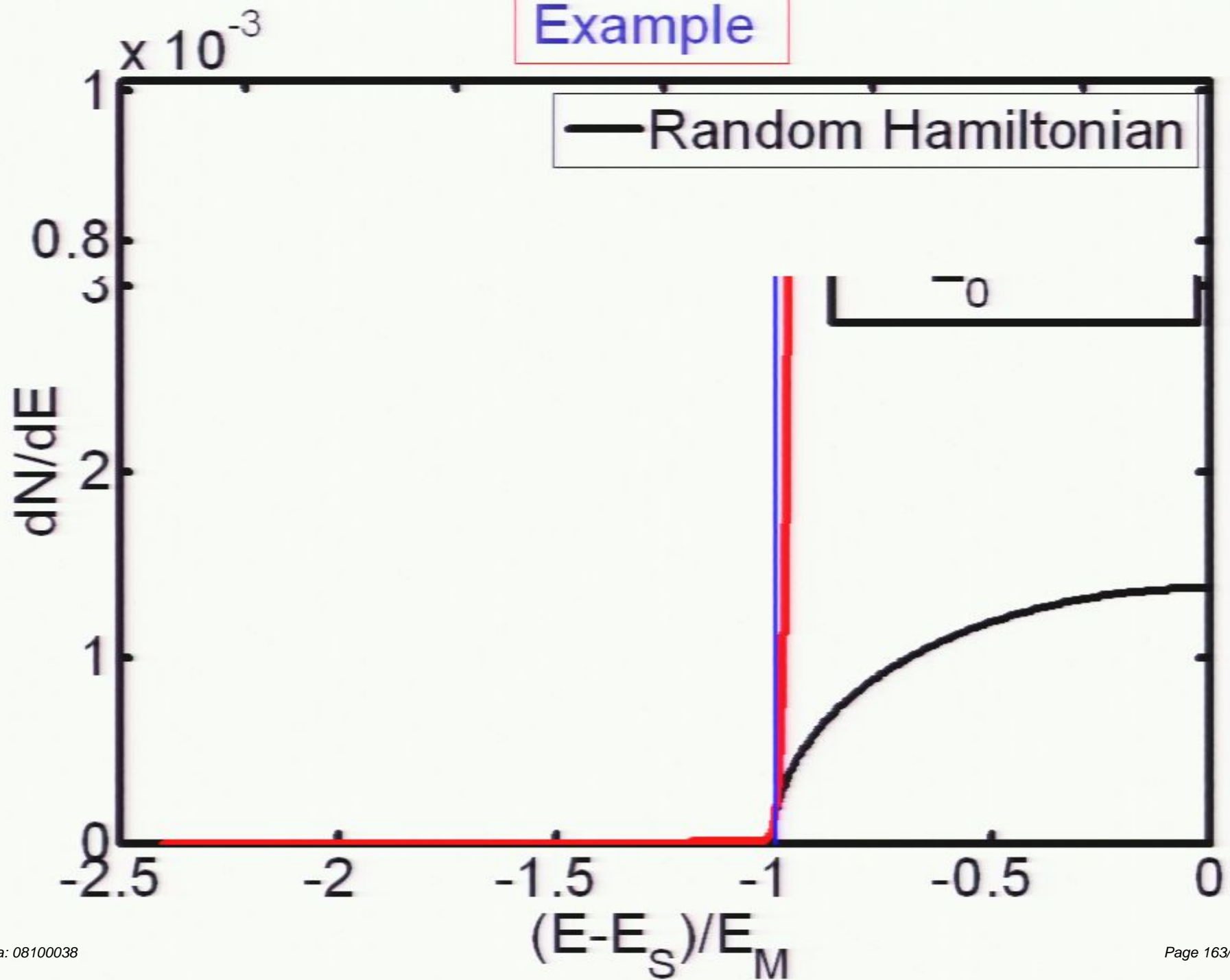
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if  
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(3/4?)

small (good)

medium  
(caution/  
interesting)

large (bad)

## Example



$$E_0 = \rho I$$

A source of  
 → interactions?  
 → deviations from  
 field theory?  
 → cosmic  
 structure?

$$\Delta_2 = \left( \left( \frac{E_0}{\Delta k} \right)^\alpha \frac{\Delta E}{E_0} \right)^2$$

		$7eV$	$\Delta_2$
1		$10^3$	$10^{-24.5}$
1/2		$10^{11}$	$10^{-16.5}$
1/2		$10^3$	$10^{-16}$
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small (good)

large (bad)

Additional thoughts:

→ Poincare invariance

$$E^2 = p^2 + m^2$$

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$$E^2 = p^2 + m^2 \xrightarrow{E \gg m} E = p$$

Additional thoughts:

→ Poincare invariance

## Additional thoughts:

AA & A. Iglesias arXiv:0805.4452

→ Use thermodynamic estimates for components of the universe to study  $S$  and its derivatives

- $S''$  related to specific heat (related to curvature of  $dN/dE$ )
- Throw caution to the wind re gravity
- Apparent consistency through  $S'''$

	Rad	DM	BH	$\Lambda$
$S$	$10^{88}$		$10^{100}$	$10^{120}$
$S' (GeV^{-1})$	$10^{13}$	$10^4$	$10^{27}$	$10^{42}$
$S'' (GeV^{-2})$	$10^{-62}$	$\pm 10^{-2} \sim 10^{-76}$	$10^{-38}$	$10^{-40}$
$S''' \text{ extrapold.}$	$10^{-142}$	$10^{-156}$	$10^{-118}$	$10^{-120}$

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Watch for updated version  
(error in posted version  
related to this topic)

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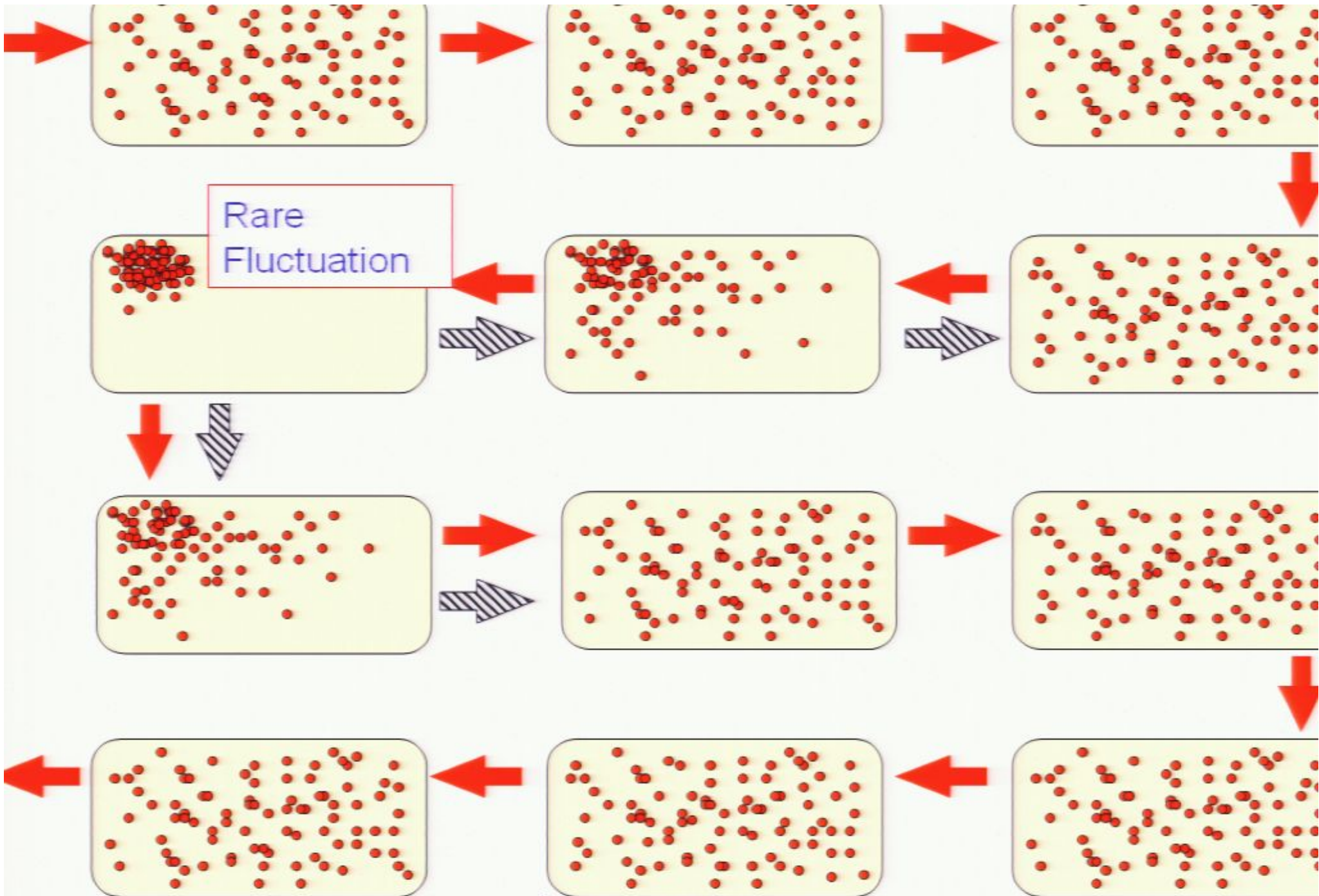
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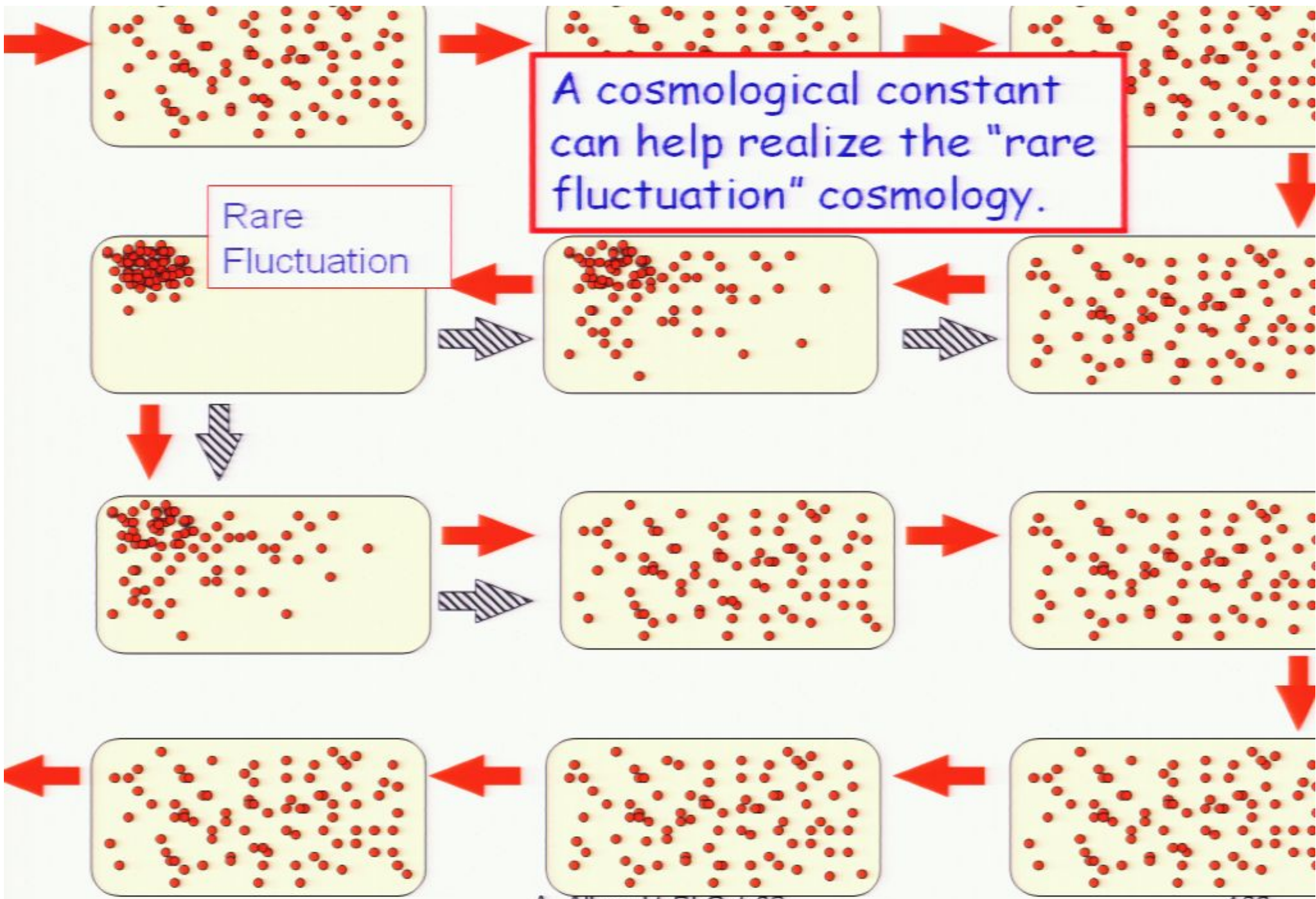
→ Arrow of time

## Additional thoughts:

### → Arrow of time

- I am very fond of the picture where cosmology is described by rare low entropy fluctuations from an equilibrium state. AA & Sorbo 200





A cosmological constant  
can help realize the "rare  
fluctuation" cosmology.

Rare  
Fluctuation

# Conclusions

- Clock ambiguity threatens “physics as we know it”
- It may be possible to extract physics despite the clock ambiguity.
- It seems possible to find field theory (to a sufficient degree) in \*any\* sufficiently large random Hamiltonian (→ a prediction re optimizing separability)
- Time dependence of  $H$  OK
- Predictions of gauge theory and gravity possible
- Perhaps “random” is the most powerful foundation for fundamental physics (as I have long argued it is for “initial conditions”).

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Radical:  
Should  
critically  
scrutinize  
input  
assumptions

VERY different form  
“normal” (i.e. “ground  
state” is pure fantasy)

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